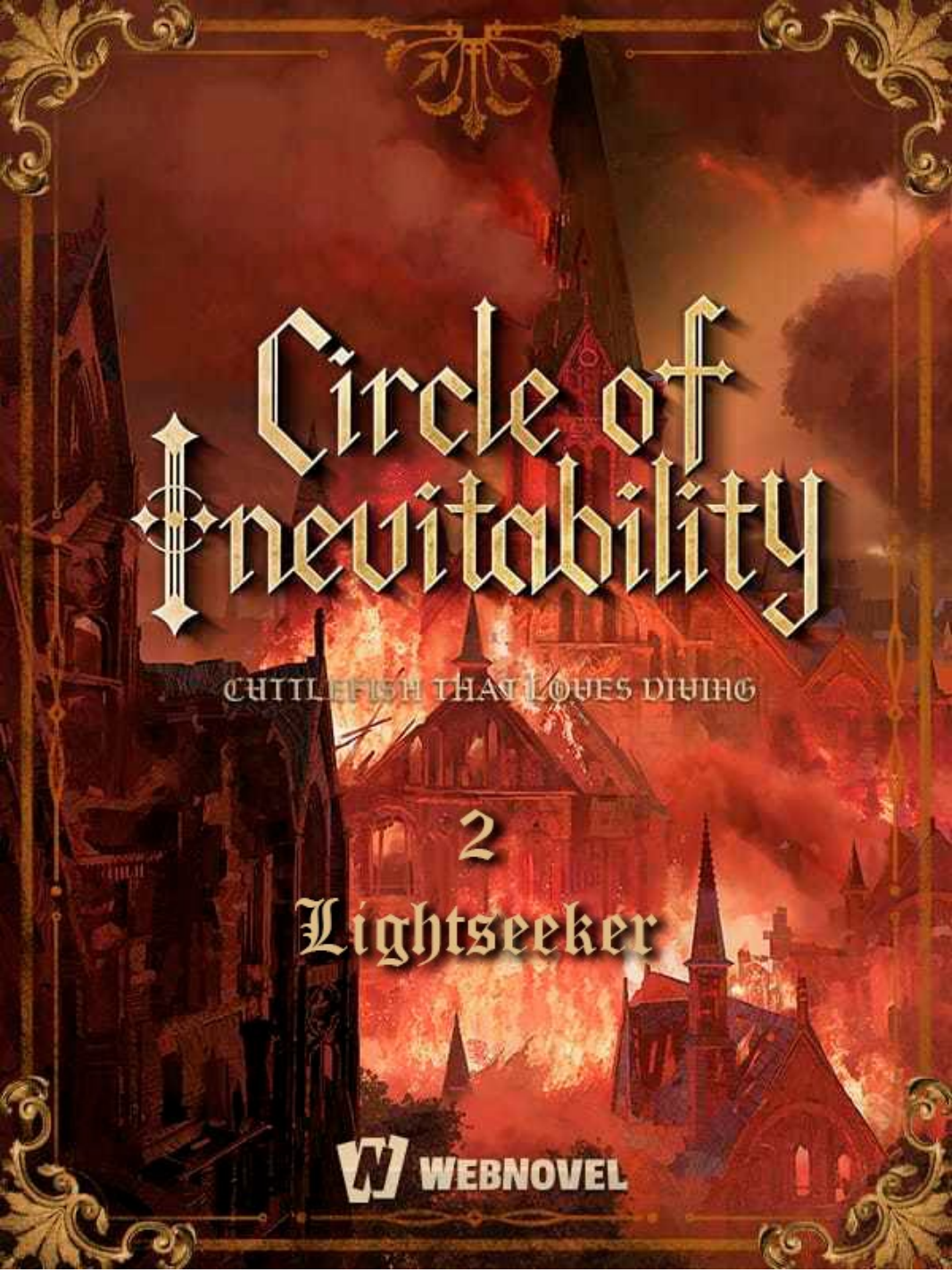
Circle of Inevitability
CUTTLEFISH THAT LOVES DIVING
2
Lightseeker
WEBNOVEL

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Chapter 110: Foreigner

For you are dust, and to dust you shall return--From the Bible, Genesis 3:19

The imposing grayish-white city wall, rising to a height of three meters, loomed before Lumian, stretching as far as the eye could see.

A multitude of private carriages, four-seaters, open tops, tandems, and cargo carriers queued, awaiting entry through the city gate.

Blue-uniformed tax collectors and white-shirted, black-vested police officers inspected each carriage methodically. Occasionally, they would demand identification or order pedestrians to open their suitcases.

Lumian, clutching his brown suitcase, scanned the scene, casting furtive glances as he sought a way to bypass the checkpoint.

Before long, a man who had observed his behavior approached.

"What's the matter, friend? You look a bit uneasy." The man was somewhat shorter than Lumian but twice as broad. His cheeks were plump, causing his blue eyes to appear minuscule.

As he neared, Lumian caught a whiff of sweat mingled with cheap cologne, prompting him to wrinkle his nose in distaste.

Lumian gestured toward the gates, puzzled, and inquired, "What's all this for? Are they searching for criminals? Why screen those entering Trier and not the ones leaving?"

The disheveled, blond-haired man in a billowy blue shirt appraised Lumian.

"My friend, are you from some small city or village?"

Upon seeing Lumian nod, the man sighed and explained, "They're collecting taxes! Tariffs!"

"Tariffs for entering Trier?" Lumian asked.

The man nodded.

"Exactly. This city wall encircles Trier. There are 54 gates, each manned by tax collectors and police. They also apprehend wanted criminals."

"Are all goods taxed?" Lumian inquired, curiosity piqued.

The man touched his blue canvas shirt and replied, "Almost everything; only grains and flour are exempt.

"Once upon a time they were, but after the war a few years back, the price of bread in Trier skyrocketed, inciting riots and protests. Eventually, the government abolished tariffs on all food.

"Ah, if only drinkers were as bold! Liquor, wine, and champagne are taxed the most. Many people venture to the suburbs on weekends to drink tax-free alcohol at small taverns. They call it 'town-hopping.'"

"Interesting..." Lumian nodded thoughtfully.
The man glanced around and lowered his voice.
"If you want to avoid the tariffs, I can help you into the city. All you have to do is pay me a small fee."
"You mean bribe them?" Lumian gestured with his chin at the tax collector and police near the city gate.
The man snorted.
"Their greed is greater than an elephant's appetite. I'll show you a path into the city without checkpoints."
"But isn't Trier completely surrounded by walls?" Lumian didn't conceal his bafflement.
The man grinned.
"You'll see soon enough." Then he teased, "Noble sir, do you require my assistance?"
Lumian considered for a moment before asking, "How much will it cost?"
"Three verl d'or," the man replied with a congenial smile. "If you agree, we can depart immediately. You can pay once we're inside the city."
"Deal." Lumian adjusted his dark wide-brimmed hat, picked up his brown suitcase, and followed the rotund man away from the city gate.
Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at a hill blanketed in vegetation and soil, with grayish-white stones peeking through.
Scaffolding, decaying pillowwood, and numerous pits were scattered about. It appeared to be an abandoned mine.
The rotund man guided Lumian through heaps of jumbled rocks to the entrance of a mine.
"Is this the shortcut?" Lumian asked cautiously.
The portly man in the blue shirt chuckled.
"You really don't know much about Trier.
"Ever heard the saying that Underground Trier is even larger than the Trier above ground?!"
"No." Lumian shook his head.
The man elucidated, "Trier used to be much smaller. It was surrounded by quarries that supplied stone for building the city. As the population swelled, the city had to expand outward, enveloping these quarries. As a result, the ground became riddled with holes and mine tunnels.
"Add to that the portion of Trier that sank underground in the Fourth Epoch, plus the sewers, subways, and gas pipes installed by the government--aren't these more extensive than what's on the surface?"
Lumian's eyes widened in understanding.

"Are you taking me into the city through Underground Trier?"
"Yes." The man turned, stooped, and entered the mine. He casually inquired, "What should I call you?"
"Ciel." Lumian brushed back the golden hair at his temples. "And you?"
"Just call me Ramayes." The burly man rummaged through a pile of stones in the mine's corner and unearthed an iron-black lantern.
Clearly made of metal, the rusted lantern was cylindrical, with the upper section slightly narrower than the lower. A black rubber lining encircled its base.
At the junction of the narrow and wide cylinders, a polished trumpet-shaped metal piece was embedded, though a few rust spots remained.
Ramayes produced a matchbox, fiddled with it briefly, and an orange flame tinged with blue erupted from the metal trumpet, illuminating the mine's depths.
"What's this?" Lumian asked, puzzled.
Holding the iron-black lamp, Ramayes ventured underground, chattering.
"Carbide lamp.
"Invented by the Cave Association. Many miners use it. I don't know why it glows, but I just need to put some rocks and water in, attach them top and bottom, and when needed, press here and ignite the mouth with flames."
Carbide and water react to form acetylene, which burns and emits light? Lumian recalled the chemistry he'd studied a few months prior.
He remained silent for a time as he followed Ramayes underground along a disused mine tunnel. Then he inquired, "The Cave Association?"
"Trier Cave Association. Formed by a group of spelunking enthusiasts. Nowadays, they seem to be involved with the mines."
Ramayes turned to Lumian, walking beside him, and asked with a grin, "Why didn't you just take the steam locomotive into Trier? The train station checkpoints aren't that strict. They just do spot checks."
Lumian reminisced and replied, "I wanted to experience the last vestiges of romance from the classical era."
"A courier carriage?" Ramayes chortled. "That's far pricier than a steam locomotive. Your accent gives you away as from the Reem or Riston region. The journey from the south to Trier runs about 120 verl d'or, doesn't it? And it takes four and a half days! On a steam locomotive, you'd pay less than 50 verl d'or for a third-class seat

and arrive in under 20 hours. So, the last bit of romance from the classical era, you say? Sounds more like a con job for folks like you. You must've shelled out a pretty penny, huh?"
Lumian responded candidly, "A fair amount. I've only got 267 verl d'or left."
Lamayer glanced at him once more and averted his eyes.
What a waste...
Clutching the carbide lamp, he traversed an archway and veered into another passage bathed in the orange-yellow glow cast by the lamp's flame.
Lumian glanced up and noticed rocks nestled in the darkness overhead, adorned with moss that wept droplets of water.
The path underfoot was pockmarked with holes, and stone pillars flanked both sides, supporting the cave's ceiling.
Stones and various objects were heaped between the pillars, creating a "street" wide enough for six or seven people to walk abreast.
Under the carbide lamp's illumination, a steel nameplate affixed to a stone pillar came into view. Inscribed on it in Intis: "Rue Ã Droite."
"There's a street name down here?" Lumian queried, puzzled.
Gripping the carbide lamp, Ramayes chuckled and replied, "Didn't I tell you? This is Underground Trier.
"In fact, it was constructed decades ago during city renovations. The brass deemed the underground too chaotic, a veritable labyrinth. Rioters, murderers, smugglers, and cultists all found refuge here, and something had to be done. Additionally, numerous houses had crumbled and sunk due to the underground quarries. Reinforcement was necessary. So, City Hall spent nearly a decade repairing pillars, constructing foundations, and connecting the previously isolated quarries, subterranean ruins, catacombs, and sewers.
"To prevent workers from getting lost, the underground streets were named to correspond with those above during the renovations. Roads, squares, and alleys were recreated down here, and nameplates were hung, marking the streets. If future repairs were needed, the names could just be referenced."
"In other words," Lumian gestured overhead with his free hand. "The real Rue Ã Droite is just above us?"
"Yes." Ramayes pressed on. "This is Underground Trier. There's an anti-smuggling wall up ahead. Quarry police often patrol the area, but don't fret. I'll guide you through a small tunnel. Heh, the brass, with their phony collars and lies, believe they can manage Underground Trier like they do above ground, but they're only

aware of half the entrances and modified routes..."
As he spoke, he led Lumian to a dead end and located a narrow crevice to crawl through. Lumian trailed closely.
Two or three minutes later, they emerged from the small tunnel. Before them stood a "wall" composed of stone pillars and a "street" wedged between.
Just then, a burly figure appeared beside the stone pillar, holding a carbide lamp, and addressed Ramayes, "Is this our customer?"
Ramayes spun around and grinned at Lumian.
"Foreigner, I've changed my mind. The price is 265 verl d'or. Wasn't I generous to leave you enough for bread and a hotel tonight?"
"What if I refuse?" Lumian's face displayed a mix of fear and defiance.
Ramayes's chubby face quivered with laughter.
"What do you think will happen? Didn't your mother warn you not to trust strangers too easily when you're away from home?"
He and the burly man closed in on Lumian from opposite directions.
Lumian smiled, set down the suitcase, and advanced towards Ramayes and his accomplice.
In the flickering firelight, over ten seconds swiftly ticked by, and the carbide lamp ended up in Lumian's possession.
Lumian crouched beside the trembling Ramayes, his face battered and swollen, and pulled all the banknotes from his wallet. In the dim orange and blue light, he counted them with grave intent.
Gently patting Ramayes's right cheek with the wad of cash, Lumian grinned.
"Now there's only 319 verl d'or left."
With that, he pocketed the banknotes and strolled toward a path that appeared to lead up to the surface.
A nameplate dangled from a stone pillar, inscribed with two lines of Intisian script: "Rue du Pot de Chambre, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman."
Someone had scratched out 'Rue du Pot de Chambre' with a stone and scrawled a new name beside it: "Rue Anarchie."

Chapter 111: Messenger

Clutching the carbide lamp, Lumian climbed the stone steps.

Soon, light appeared ahead, accompanied by a cacophony of noise. Emerging from the silent underground, it felt as if the entire world had sprung to life.

Lumian quickened his pace, twisting the valve on the carbide lamp with his right hand, stopping the water droplets from dripping into the carbide pile below. As the acetylene gas burned out, the flames in the metal mouth gradually faded.

Just then, he caught a glimpse of the scene outside.

Tall and low buildings appeared to have solidified at the moment of collapse, either tilted or on the verge of tumbling down, but standing stubbornly.

Pedestrians wore old or tattered clothing, and arguments and curses filled the air, the noise never subsiding.

At the underground exit, Lumian spotted a five-story building called the Auberge du Coq Doré.

The top two floors of the brownish building seemed like later additions, contrasting with the Roselle-era pillar walls, arches, large windows, and patterns on the lower floors. It looked so simplistic it could've been transplanted from Cordu.

Lugging his suitcase and carbide lamp, Lumian navigated through children scavenging for orange peels and quarreling adults until he reached the entrance of the Auberge du Coq Doré.

He glanced at the hotel floor, littered with yellow phlegm, shredded paper, spilled ketchup, and alcohol stains. Occasionally, a horde of bedbugs would congregate on the ceiling and walls.

Had his hands been free, Lumian would have applauded the scene. Cordu's Ol' Tavern was much cleaner than this!

He found a route devoid of filth and headed to the front desk at a moderate pace.

A plump, middle-aged woman sat there, her grayish-white dress stained with oil and her brown hair tied in a simple bun.

She looked up at Lumian with her blue eyes, unfazed by the disdain and resistance on his face.

"This is the best and cheapest inn on Rue Anarchie, in the market area. But the owner's a miser who can't bear to hire cleaning ladies. He only gets freelancers to clean it once a week."

"Does he skimp on your salary too?" Lumian asked, feigning naivete.

This set the woman off.

"Do you want a room or not?"

"Yes." Lumian quickly clarified his intent, looking frightened. "I'd

like to know the price."
The woman calmed down.
"It depends on the room. The top two floors are 3 verl d'or a week, and the bottom two are 5 verl d'or. If that's too much, you can knock on doors and ask who's willing to share their bed or rent out floor space for 1 to 1.5 verl d'or a week."
"Give me a room on the lower two floors." Lumian reasoned it'd be easier to escape, whether by jumping from a window or taking the stairs.
The plump woman sized him up.
"Pay 15 verl d'or upfront for the whole month, and it's yours."
"Why the discount?" Lumian feigned the ignorance of a country bumpkin new to the city.
The woman sneered.
"Many people have no choice but to move or leave Trier after a week or two. This place is both heaven and hell."
Lumian pulled out three light-blue 5 verl d'or notes and handed them over.
The currency was all in 5-verl d'or denominations, featuring the bust of Intis Republic's first president, Levanx, along with laboring farmers and herders on the front, and the Hornacis mountain range on the back.
Upon receiving the full month's rent, the plump woman's expression visibly relaxed. She produced two brass keys strung together and tossed them to Lumian.
"Room 207 on the second floor. There's a small diner downstairs and a tavern in the basement. You'll find sulfur in the room's table drawer to help chase away those damn bugs. My name's Fels. If you need anything, just come to me."
"Thank you, Madame Fels." Lumian took the keys, grabbed his suitcase and carbide lamp, and headed upstairs to the second floor.
As he ascended, he noticed newspapers and cheap pink paper plastered on the walls, though some had already peeled away, exposing the cracks they were meant to hide and an abundance of bedbugs.
The second floor contained eight rooms and two washrooms. Each room was cramped, with a bed to the right. A table nestled between the bed's edge and the wall sat beneath the window, a rickety chair positioned in front of it.
There was no other furniture, but rows of bedbugs crawled across the ceiling.
Having grown accustomed to Aurore's cleanliness, Lumian set down his suitcase and carbide lamp, opened the drawer, and took

out some sulfur. He lit it with a match, and as the pungent smell filled the room, the bedbugs fled.
Within seconds, Lumian detected the sulfuric scent from the room next door.
Almost simultaneously, some of the bedbugs returned, seeking refuge.
He quickly understood the situation: he had smoked the bedbugs into the adjacent room, and the tenant had used sulfur to chase them back.
Amused, Lumian bent down, opened his suitcase, and took out pen and paper.
Amidst the potent sulfur smell, he sat at the wooden table and began writing.
"Honorable Madam Magician,
"I've arrived in Trier as agreed. Please advise on my next steps, which organization to join, and how to contact them...
"Are the two psychologists available soon? When can I receive treatment?
"Do you have any new leads on Guillaume Bénet and Madame Pualis..."
After penning the letter, Lumian retrieved an orange candle from his sister's room.
Lighting it with his spirituality, the scent of citrus and lavender enveloped the air.
Instinctively, he closed his eyes, his expression calming.
After standing quietly for a minute or two, Lumian used the ritual silver dagger to sanctify the candle and create a wall of spirituality. He then dripped essential oil on the flame.
With the preparations complete, he placed the Magician card on the altar, a medium for summoning a messenger to pinpoint the incantation.
Lumian stepped back, observing the misty orange fire, and muttered in ancient Hermes, "I!"
An invisible wind swirled within the spiritual wall, dimming the room.
Switching to Hermes, he continued, "I summon in my name: The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, an upper world creature that is friendly to humans, a messenger that belongs solely to Magician."
As the wind howled, the candle flame turned deep blue, casting a sinister, cold atmosphere.
Lumian focused on the candle, awaiting Madam Magician's messenger.
After a few seconds of silence, the letter on the altar floated into

the air. Surprised, Lumian glanced up to find a "doll" the size of a man's forearm perched atop the carved window.
With long blond hair, light-blue eyes, pale-white skin, and an exquisite pale-gold dress, the "doll" bore strikingly realistic yet bizarre features.
In the next second, the letter landed in the "doll's" smooth, shiny hand that lacked any skin-like texture.
"Are you Madam Magician's messenger?" Lumian asked.
The "doll" slowly lowered its head, Lumian's figure reflecting in its unfocused, light-blue eyes.
Its voice, ethereal and angry, replied, "Choose a cleaner environment next time!"
With that, the "doll" vanished along with the letter.
Lumian was stunned for a moment before murmuring, "Didn't Aurore say the altar just needed to be clean and tidy?"
As he glanced around, he noticed numerous bedbug corpses on the floor.
The room was now insect-free.
This is better than sulfur... Lumian stroked his chin and ended the summoning ritual.
Lumian habitually cleaned the room before squatting beside his suitcase to retrieve his toiletries.
Aurore's dark-colored witchcraft notebooks lay undisturbed at the bottom.
During his journey to Trier, Lumian had already skimmed through them without finding anything suspicious. Aurore wasn't one for recording her personal thoughts or daily minutiae; her witchcraft notebook was purely dedicated to mystical knowledge, filled with incantations, symbols, and principles for selecting ingredients.
Likely due to Aurore's penchant for keeping detailed accounts, most spells included information about when and where they were obtained, their cost, or the items exchanged for them.
Lumian realized the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society likely had numerous interest groups. Aurore frequently attended 'Academy' gatherings, where many spells were traded among members. She also participated in exchanges with other groups, occasionally acquiring mystical knowledge and spells from events like April Fool's Day.
Finding nothing amiss in the notebooks, Lumian resolved to continue his investigation after consulting the psychologists and locating Padre and Madame Pualis.
He knew his sister wouldn't have mentioned the notebook without reason at that critical juncture. There must have been an important message she wished to convey.

Gazing at the dark-covered notebooks, Lumian determined to study his sister's recorded knowledge in reverse order, starting that night.

Although using spells in combat was nearly impossible for a Hunter, understanding them could help him identify any issues with the corresponding mystical knowledge or detect abnormalities.

With his belongings packed, Lumian's stomach growled in hunger.

He stood up and glanced at the window. The dimming light of dusk allowed him to vaguely see his reflection in the glass.

His hair, now dyed blond and grown out, barely disguised his features. Dressed in a white shirt, black vest, and dark suit, his cold, indifferent expression made him appear years older. Even Guillaume Bénet would find him only vaguely familiar.

Lumian patted his face, coaxing a smile, before opening the door and stepping out.

Chapter 112: Charlie

In the dimly-lit cellar of the Auberge du Coq Doré, a cozy bar had just enough space for 20 to 30 patrons.

The moment Lumian stepped in, he saw a man leap onto a small round table, beer in hand, and address the handful of customers around him,

"Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears! I experienced something unbelievable two days ago!"

By the scant light from the steam lamps on the wall, Lumian discerned that the man was quite young, around 22 or 23 years old. He had short, light-brown hair and a clean-shaven face, which was flushed, likely from the alcohol.

Wearing a flaxen-colored shirt, black trousers, and leather slip-ons, the man stood just over 1.7 meters tall. However, his unusually short limbs made him appear closer to 1.6 meters.

Waving his stubby arms and slurring his words, he continued, "How incredible was it? I'll tell you, it's changed my entire perspective on faith. As a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery, I'm now ready to convert to the Eternal Blazing Sun!

"Listen up, isn't that astonishing?

"Can you imagine how famished I was after five days? I'd lost my job and been fired by that good-for-nothing manager. I couldn't find work even after exhausting my savings.

"For five days, I starved, barely able to leave my bed. I was on the verge of death. Do you know how that feels? Oh, may God bless you and never let you find out.

"In that moment, I couldn't bear the thought of dying like this. I came to Trier to make my fortune, and I had to do something. That's when I noticed the portrait of Saint Vièvе on the wall.

"Yes, with great effort, I managed to get up, kneel before Her, and pray for Her help. I was still a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery then, but what wouldn't a starving man do? Besides, it couldn't hurt, right?

"Five minutes after I finished praying, an old friend dropped by and saw my dire state. He didn't have much himself, but he reminded me that I'd rented a kerosene lamp for use at night. The deposit was 35 coppets—a whole seven licks!

"God, I'd completely forgotten. With my friend's help, I returned the lamp and used the refund to buy bread and half a liter of cheap booze. The bread was cold and damp, like it'd been doused in putty. The alcohol was a bit off and weak, but it was the most delicious meal I've ever had. Ladies and gentlemen, I was reborn!

"I found a new job today, and tomorrow, during my break, I'll light

a candle at the nearest Saint Vièvе Cathedral!"
Saint Vièvе was a female angel mentioned in the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Bible. She was one of the city's guardian angels in Trier. The other two were prominent figures from the God of Steam and Machinery Church and the annals of Intis.
Lumian observed the young man's blue eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as he ambled towards the bar.
The bartender, who was polishing a glass with a cloth, glanced at the orator on the round table and chuckled.
"Charlie never could keep quiet. Always talking."
In his mid-thirties, the bartender sported a thin, dark brown beard circling his mouth, and his hair of the same color was tied back in an artistically casual ponytail.
Lumian took a seat at the bar and asked with a grin, "Is he telling the truth?"
"Who knows?" The bartender shrugged. "You must've heard the proverb: It's better to trust a snake than a Reemian. Charlie is from Reem."
Reem and Riston Provinces both hailed from the south. Their accents were similar, but they were mountainous provinces more akin to Lenburg.
Lumian mused aloud,"I don't think that's the whole proverb. I feel like there's more to it."
The bartender's azure eyes sparkled with amusement as he replied, "You're right. That proverb is longer than you'd think.
"Trust a Loenese over a Reemian. Trust a snake over a Reemian, but never trust the Islanders."
The islands referred to the Fog Sea archipelago west of Intis. This was one of the Republic's overseas colonies. The Islanders often played the roles of thugs and con artists in Trier.
Without waiting for Lumian to inquire further, the bartender cast a mocking glance at Charlie, still droning on, and whispered, "If he really experienced that, he certainly doesn't know that the portrait of Saint Vièvе isn't in his room."
"Then whose is it?" Lumian asked, amused.
The bartender struggled to suppress his laughter.
"Charlie lives in Room 504. The previous tenant frequented the Quartier de la Princesse Rouge's Rue de la Muraille. The image in the room was of one of Trier's most famous prostitutes a few years back, Susanna Matisse.
"Just think. Charlie believes he's praying to an angel for help, but he's actually praying to a prostitute. He even feels lucky to have escaped hunger and landed a new job. How ironic!"
"Indeed," Lumian concurred.

It was a scene beyond his wildest imagination. Reality was sometimes stranger than fiction.
He then added, "As long as it works."
The bartender didn't pursue the topic further and inquired, "What can I get you?"
"A glass of fennel absinthe." Lumian tapped the bar counter with his finger, signaling he was deep in thought. "What kind of food do you have here?"
"How about DuVar broth? Three licks for a ladle," the bartender suggested.
Three licks equaled 15 coppets—0.15 verl d'or.
Lumian appeared intrigued.
"What's DuVar broth?"
The bartender casually explained, "A restaurant owner, DuVar, invented it. He simmered meat, sauerkraut, and turnips together to create a hearty broth. Finally, he added cheese and bread crumbs. Just one serving can fill your stomach, and it tastes pretty good. As a result, DuVar is now wealthy and has relocated to Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra."
Lumian was currently in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, also known as the market district, situated on the south bank of the Srenzo River, home to numerous slums. Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra was on the north bank of the Srenzo River, near Avenue du Boulevard, one of the Republic's core areas.
Trier's city walls encompassed a total of 20 quartiers.
"Sounds good." Lumian nodded with a smile. "I'll have one."
Though he could restore his physical state by 6 a.m. and not worry about hunger, eating was one of the few things that made him feel alive.
The bartender nodded and asked, "Little Mummy or Somersault?"
"What?" Lumian didn't hide his confusion.
Unfazed, the bartender calmly explained, "That's common slang in Trier bars, cafés, and beer houses. Little Mummy means a small shot of fennel absinthe. Somersault is a double shot. Red Tomato has pomegranate juice added, and with mint, it's called Parrot. There are plenty more like that. Friend, you still have much to learn in Trier."
"Little Mummy it is." Lumian sensed the bartender's subtle disdain for foreigners, but he didn't mind.
"Seven licks," the bartender announced as he flipped open a small goblet.
This was pricier than the absinthe at Cordu's Ol' Tavern, but it was typical in places subject to city taxes.
Soon, a glass of pale green absinthe, glowing hypnotically,

appeared before Lumian.
He picked it up and sipped. The faint, lingering bitterness of the refreshing taste spread and burrowed into his brain.
As Lumian waited for the waitress to bring DuVar's broth, he noticed glass jars, hoses, valves, gears, and other items piled beside the bar counter.
"What's this?" He glanced inquisitively at the bartender.
As the bartender wiped a glass, he casually replied, "Left by a previous tenant. He's a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery. He always thinks he has a knack for mechanics and has accumulated many similar items."
"Where is he now?" Lumian asked, playing along even though he knew the answer wouldn't be pleasant.
The bartender paused for a couple of seconds before answering, "He went to the factory, and word is he got distracted while working and was pulled into the machinery. Half of him was crushed."
Lumian didn't pry further. He turned to examine the half-assembled parts and fell into deep thought.
A few seconds later, he left the bar stool and squatted beside the counter, tinkering with the pile.
The bartender glanced at him but didn't interfere. He only notified Lumian when DuVar's broth arrived from the kitchen.
After busying himself for a while, Lumian returned to the bar stool and sampled the hearty broth with a spoon.
The rich aroma of meat, the taste of cheese, the tangy sauerkraut, and the sweetness of the turnip melded to create an unforgettable flavor. The bread crumbs soaked in juice were the crowning gem of the dish.
Lumian didn't expect that a soup costing three licks would include several pieces of meat. It could genuinely fill an adult's stomach.
Once the plate was empty, Lumian pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. He squatted back beside the half-assembled parts and resumed his work.
Ten minutes later, he placed a machine on the bar counter.
Above the machine was a glass jar, and beneath it were intricate components connected to two rubber hoses.
Lumian then asked for a glass of clear water and poured in the remaining fennel absinthe, tinting the colorless liquid a pale green.
Finally, he inserted one of the rubber hoses into the cup.
The fashionable bartender, his hair tied back in a ponytail, watched intently and asked, puzzled, "What's this?"
"My invention," Lumian declared, tracing a triangular Sacred

Emblem on his chest. "I'm also a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery, with a few impressive achievements in the mechanical field."
He then extended his black-gloved left hand and gestured toward the machine.
"This is a groundbreaking machine. Its effects are beyond your wildest dreams!"
"What can it do?" Charlie, suspected of having prayed to a prostitute, approached the bar counter with a beer bottle and a curious expression.
Lumian explained, both solemn and excited, "It's called the Idiot Instrument. It tests a person's stupidity and intelligence."
"Really?" Charlie and the bartender looked skeptical.
Lumian detailed his idea, "It's easy to use. Blow into the tube until the liquid in the cup rises into the glass jar and forms bubbles.
"By observing these bubbles, we can determine the corresponding stupidity or intelligence index."
Intrigued, Charlie said after observing Lumian, "Fascinating. Just as I'd expect from a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery."
He picked up the exposed rubber hose and blew into it.
The light green liquid in the cup flowed through the interconnected gears, valves, and other components, rising into the glass jar above and forming a small bubble.
"What does it say?" Charlie asked, eager for the result.
Lumian's mouth curved into a sly smile.
"My friend, the principles of this machine are quite simple. When you believe me enough to actually produce a bubble with it, that's when you prove you're a 'dumb idiot.'"
Charlie's expression froze, his eyes burning with anger.
The bartender beside him laughed.
"Excellent prank!" he exclaimed, genuinely impressed.
Lumian grinned at Charlie, waiting for the explosion.
After a few tense seconds, Charlie swallowed his anger and turned to the patrons who had been listening to his story.
"Ladies and gentlemen, behold what I've discovered: a groundbreaking machine! It can test your intelligence index!"

Chapter 113: Tenants

"You're such an interesting person!"

A drunk Charlie slung his arm around Lumian's shoulder as they stumbled out of the raucous bar.

Inside, nearly 20 people sang, gambled, and yelled, releasing pent-up emotions.

At moments like these, they didn't seem like paupers on meager wages but rather kings and queens.

"I thought you'd play Billy B with them." Lumian draped his arm over Charlie's back and grinned as they headed for the stairs leading upstairs.

Billy B was a popular gambling game in Trier, one Lumian had just recently learned.

Unlike Trieriens' favorite Fighting Evil, Billy B only required a piece of paper. Depending on the number of players, the dealer drew a grid of squares, ranging from 9 to 64. Each square was assigned a number, allowing participants to place their bets.

The dealer then determined a lucky number by drawing lots, tossing coins, or throwing dice. The winner took the entire pot.

If no one won, the money went to the dealer.

The patrons of the Auberge du Coq Doré's underground bar were either locals or impoverished folks from nearby. Their wallets were thin, so they mainly wagered alcohol instead of cash. For instance, a game of Billy B might only reward the winner with a glass of booze bought by everyone's pooled money.

Charlie released a long burp.

"I haven't gotten my salary for this week. Can't be too indulgent!"

He turned to Lumian, excitement in his voice, "Did you know? I'm now an apprentice attendant at Hôtel du Cygne Blanc, the one on Rue Neuve in Quartier des Thermes.

"What does that mean? It means I get to wear a white shirt, red vest, and black suit. I'll tie an elegant bow and earn 65 verl d'or a month! When I become a full attendant, I hear that during peak season, I can make 7 verl d'or a day just in tips!

"When I strike it rich, I'll open my own motel—no, a hotel. When the time comes, I'll hire you as an attendant foreman. That jerk just walks around in his tailcoat, nitpicking, and earns 150 verl d'or a month!"

Apprentice attendants earn slightly more than manual laborers...

Lumian reeked of alcohol, but his eyes remained clear. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

He recalled reading a newspaper in his study earlier in the year, boasting that Trier's laborers earned about 700 verl d'or annually.

At the time, Lumian didn't have a clear concept of that figure. He didn't know if it was too much or too little. As a vagrant, he'd only worried about how much food he could get each day and whether kind people might offer him a few licks. The income of Cordu villagers was mainly in goods, so he understood specific prices and the value of various banknotes, but he lacked a broader understanding.

Of course, this was also because Aurore's income was very high, so he hardly fretted about family finances.

As far as Lumian knew, Aurore's fame brought her a significant income through book sales and contracts. Last year's royalties had neared 130,000 verl d'or.

However, Aurore spent as much as she earned. Spells, materials, and arcane knowledge accounted for most of her expenses. She might also be supporting struggling members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society or donating to government- or church-run charities.

Yet what puzzled Lumian was the absence of a deposit slip at home when he left Cordu.

He knew all too well that Aurore was a saver. Spending big was only possible because she had stashed away plenty of cash at Suchit Bank and other institutions.

For a moment, Lumian suspected that Guillaume Bénet's crew had snatched it while he and his sister were being used as sacrifices or vessels.

As Lumian and Charlie made their way to the second floor, arms slung around each other's shoulders, a mournful cry pierced the air.

"You bastard!"

Bang! A door slammed, muffling the wail and leaving only echoes in the hallway.

A figure in a crisp black tailcoat approached the stairs from the far end of the hall.

He was a young man, roughly Charlie's age. His brownish-yellow hair was styled in a 30-70 parting, and his dark brown eyes were devoid of expression. His thin lips were pressed tightly together.

Quite handsome, he held a black top hat in his hand, looking more like he belonged at a high-society soirée than the Auberge du Coq Doré.

Following the man's cries was a woman's voice, heavy with pain and despair.

As Charlie watched the man vanish down the stairs, his flushed face contorted.

"What a bastard!"

"You know him?" Lumian was still rather 'concerned' about his neighbors. After all, he might be staying here for a while. The more he knew about his surroundings, the safer he'd be.
Charlie scoffed, "That's Laurent, Mrs. Lakazan's son from Room 201.
"Mrs. Lakazan slaves away, mending socks and crafting all sorts for 16 hours a day just to support that bastard. He always dresses nicely and spends her money at fancy cafés, claiming he's mingling with high society to find opportunities to make it big!
"Heh, he thinks he's so talented..."
Before Charlie could finish, another heated argument erupted between a man and a woman nearby.
They hurled insults at each other.
"Third floor's a couple who eloped. They're like this every day when they're almost broke." Charlie clicked his tongue and grinned. "My friend, you'll have to get used to it. This is the market district, Rue Anarchie, the Auberge du Coq Doré. We've got the seriously ill, the bankrupt, swindling peddlers, foreigners who never leave the inn and only drink downstairs, broke street girls, lunatics who wake up in a frenzy, jobless stonemasons, veterans, miserly old men, and wanted criminals...
"They should all thank Monsieur Ive for being so lenient. As long as they don't default on rent, he's pretty forgiving."
"Monsieur Ive... The innkeeper? The miser Madame Fels mentioned?" Lumian inquired.
Charlie grinned and replied, "That's him, a kind but stingy fellow. He even provides everyone with free sulfur!
"Burp, I haven't seen Monsieur Ive in a few days. I'm really worried he'll try to save a few coppets by visiting some random woman on Rue Anarchie and catch some nasty disease instead of patronizing Rue de la Muraille or Quartier de la Princesse Rouge..."
As he spoke, Charlie waved his hand.
"Ciel, burp. I'm off to bed. I've got to leave at six tomorrow morning and get to the hotel by seven.
"Burp, if you can't find a job, let me know. I'll introduce you to a handyman at our hotel. You can earn 50 verl d'or a month. Stick around long enough, and you might make 75. Plus, there's free food. We even get a liter of wine every night!"
"Alright." Lumian smiled as he watched Charlie climb the stairs.
At the same time, he muttered to himself, Simple provocation isn't doing much for the potion's digestion...
He had assembled the Idiot Instrument in the bar to rile everyone up. The result was successful, but it didn't further the potion's digestion.
During his journey from Darième to Trier, Lumian frequently

provoked others. Sometimes he felt the potion digest, but most times, he gained nothing.
If he couldn't find a better way to act, he suspected it would take at least a year to fully digest the Provoker potion.
Heading back to Room 207, Lumian heard a bout of coughing from upstairs. He heard a woman berating her lover, calling him "lazy" and "trash." Gunshots rang out, followed by the sound of a group chasing someone outside.
This was life at the Auberge du Coq Doré and on Rue Anarchie.
Charlie had said that even the police wouldn't dare walk here alone at night. They needed a partner to bolster their courage.
Taking out the brass key, Lumian opened the door and stepped back into his room.
The bedbugs seemed to have sensed something and stayed away.
Lumian sniffed the sulfur and glanced up. A letter lay silently on the wooden table beside the window.
He took a few steps forward and picked up the folded piece of paper.
Madam Magician's reply? Lumian mused, unfolding the letter and reading it under the crimson moonlight streaming through the window.
"I'm glad you arrived in Trier without issue. This shows you've mastered the basic technique of evading capture and regained your experience navigating the dark underbelly of society.
"At 3:30 p.m. this Sunday, a psychologist will treat you at Booth D in Mason Café, located in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
"For the next few days, your mission is to venture near the catacombs in Quartier de l'Observatoire and locate a man named Osta Trul. He often masquerades as a warlock to con tourists and locals alike.
"By any means necessary, earn Osta Trul's trust and reveal your powers when the time is right."
Quartier du Jardin Botanique and Quartier de l'Observatoire were west of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, adjacent to one another. The former lay further south, while the latter was closer to the north, right by the Srenzo River.
Lumian read Madam Magician's reply over and over, committing the relevant locations, times, and names to memory. Then he struck a match and burned the Intisian-scripted paper.
Having done all this, he headed to the nearest washroom to freshen up. Afterward, he took out Fallen Mercury, wrapped in black cloth, removed his coat, and lay on the bed.
The bedbug-infested ceiling met his gaze, and the faint sounds of coughing, crying, and arguing filled the room.

Soon after, the eloped couple announced their reconciliation through a passionate and vigorous exercise, accompanied by uninhibited moans.
Outside on the street, a few coarse voices sang vulgar songs, punctuated by gunshots, followed by curses, the clashing of poles, and the sound of sharp weapons piercing flesh.
Compared to Cordu, the nights here were far from quiet.

Chapter 114: Life Experience

At the break of dawn in early May, the sky remained cloaked in darkness. The setting crimson moon and the scattered stars cast a faint glow, thinning the darkness just enough to reveal nearby silhouettes.

Lumian awoke early and freshened up. He donned his formal attire from the previous day and a wide-brimmed top hat. He tried his best to smile at his reflection in the glass window that served as a mirror.

As he descended the stairs, hurried footsteps echoed from above.

Soon, Charlie came into view.

He was still dressed in a linen shirt, black trousers, and strapless leather shoes. His flushed complexion had turned a shade paler, and his small blue eyes betrayed unmistakable fatigue.

"Good morning, Ciel," Charlie greeted Lumian with enthusiasm.

He seemed quite pumped.

"Shouldn't you have left long ago?" Lumian asked, smiling.

He had only awoken to freshen up when he heard the cathedral clock chime six o'clock. Charlie should have departed by then.

Charlie lowered his head, adjusting his clothes as he muttered, "I drank too much last night and had a wonderful dream. I didn't want to wake up..."

As they conversed, the pair reached the ground floor. They traversed the dingy, dimly lit hall towards the door reflecting starlight.

An elderly couple, grizzled and slightly stooped, opened the door. In their sixties, they were both short, the man barely 1.65 meters tall and the woman even shorter. Their dark jackets and yellowish cloth dresses were tattered and oil-stained.

"Who are they?" Lumian had expected Madame Fels or the miserly motel owner, Monsieur Ive, to be in charge of opening the door in the morning.

Charlie didn't slow down, casually explaining, "Monsieur Ruhr and Madame Michel, they're the swindlers I mentioned yesterday. They scam tourists into buying things.

"They rise early every day, and Madame Fels has them open the inn's door. In return, she turns a blind eye to the mess and stench they create in their room.

"Can you believe it? They haven't changed their clothes since I moved in. It's been seven months. Seven months!"

No wonder it's so filthy... Lumian could recall his own grimy days as a vagabond, but Aurore's penchant for cleanliness still made him frown.

Charlie strode quickly out of Auberge du Coq Doré, puzzledly asking, "Ciel, why are you up so early too?"
As they stepped onto the street, a bustling scene unfolded before them.
Countless workers, clerks, and laborers hurried along in their gray, blue, black, and brown clothes, occasionally stopping to purchase food from street vendors.
Some women carrying wooden baskets moved more leisurely. They meandered between various vendors, comparing prices and quality.
The peddlers lined both sides of Rue Anarchie, occupying half the street and leaving just enough room for a carriage to pass.
They bellowed loudly, vying for customers' attention.
"Whiskey Sour, Apple Whiskey Sour. Two licks a liter!"
"Freshwater fish from Bondi's fish pond!"
"Fresh cod and herring, come and take a look!"
"Onion bread, one lick, just one lick!"
"Salted meat, delicious salted meat!"
"Soap and wigs imported from Loen!"
"Buy the kids a bottle of refreshing soda!"
"Hot sauce, soybean paste, scallions, water celery!"
"..."
Absorbing the sounds and energy of Rue Anarchie, Lumian turned to Charlie and smiled.
"I just arrived in Trier and couldn't sleep. I thought I'd walk around and see if I could find a suitable job."
As a Hunter, it was essential for him to familiarize himself with the area he frequented and understand its intricacies.
It would be too late to adapt if something were to happen.
Charlie nodded knowingly.
He said with enthusiasm, "You could try your luck at Rue des Blouses Blanches. It's between Le Marché du Gentleman and the steam locomotive station.
"Many motel, hotel, and restaurant managers like to chat at the café there. They use the opportunity to hire dishwashers, floor cleaners, washroom attendants, and apprentice attendants.
"If you have money on you, remember to buy the café waiters a drink. They'll introduce you to the right person and give you a shot at a better job."
Without waiting for Lumian's reply, Charlie shared his wisdom.
"You must pay attention to your appearance. Do as I do."
As he spoke, he raised his hands and slapped his face, mimicking an actual slap, but with less force.
Soon, Charlie's pallid complexion regained its "rosiness."

"Look, look." He pointed at himself smugly and said, "Don't I appear more energetic? Those managers don't want to hire someone who looks particularly destitute and sickly. They think it'll bring trouble. They're either unwilling to give you a decent job or will slash your salary. If you do this before entering the café like me, it'll make you seem like someone who has a place to sleep and breakfast to eat. But doing it too early won't work, as this 'rosiness' will gradually fade."

This clever job-hunting technique was new to Lumian, a former vagabond. He found it fascinating.

He smiled and nodded.

"I still have enough money to rent a place and fill my stomach. I don't need to do this for now, but who knows if I'll need it in the future?"

He deliberately didn't conceal the fact that he still had a fair amount of verl d'or.

What if a generous soul was willing to "donate" another sum?

Charlie expressed his understanding and took out 5 coppet worth of copper coins to buy onion bread from a nearby vendor.

Lumian felt a pang of familiarity.

During his time on the streets, if he could acquire money, his first choice was onion bread.

It was cheap, and the aroma of onions lingered, creating the illusion of having just eaten a satisfying meal.

Lumian also purchased onion bread for breakfast. Alongside Charlie, they navigated through the numerous vendors and exited Rue Anarchie.

"I love the mornings here!" Charlie glanced back and sighed with his signature zeal. "Those gangsters who deserve to rot in hell can't get up this early. They can't destroy this captivating vitality."

He then waved at Lumian.

"I've got to take the subway. Otherwise, I'll be late today. That damned foreman will surely dock my pay!"

After saying goodbye to Charlie, Lumian wandered around Rue Anarchie, exploring the area like a curious tourist.

Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman was situated on the south bank of the Srenzo River, in the southeast corner of Trier, officially known as "Quartier 13." Trier boasted various quarters named by numbers, each with its own historical and characteristic monikers. Even officials sometimes used these colloquial names.

The district earned its name from Le Marché du Gentleman. Proximity to the Srenzo River allowed for a Suhit steam locomotive station, which catered to travelers from southern Intis.

Encircled by the market and the steam locomotive station, many

of its streets were notoriously dangerous and teeming with impoverished inhabitants. It was one of Trier's slums.
To the north of the market district, on the south bank of the Srenzo River, lay Quartier 5, the Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative or Quartier Universitaire. Trier Normal College, Trier Higher Mining College, and Intis Academy of Fine Arts were all located here.
To the northeast of the city, on the north bank of the Srenzo River, stood Quartier 12, known as the Noel Quartier. It housed the Veterans' Home, Wounded Soldiers' Hospital, and several large medical facilities.
To the northwest of the market district was Quartier 6—Quartier de l'Observatoire—where Lumian planned to visit later. It contained the primary entrance to the catacombs.
To the southwest of the market district was Quartier 14, known as Quartier du Jardin Botanique. On Sunday, Lumian was scheduled for treatment with a psychologist at the Mason café there. This area was also called Quartier du Sans-Culottes due to the large factories located south of the botanical garden.
And so, Lumian spent nearly the entire morning traversing the streets of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
As noon approached, Lumian returned to the vicinity of Suhit's train station, intending to find a spot for lunch before heading to the catacombs in search of the phony warlock, Osta Trul.
Walking along, Lumian spotted the couple—Ruhr and Michel—who also resided at Auberge du Coq Doré.
They were hawking parcels of items wrapped in paper bags to groups that appeared to be foreigners.
As Lumian drew near, the gray-haired, ragged, and wrinkled Ruhr leaned towards him and lowered his voice. "Do you want photos of a street maîtresse d'atelier?"
"What's a street maîtresse d'atelier?" Lumian didn't conceal his confusion or his revulsion at Ruer's stench.
Ruhr waved the thin paper bag in his hand and whispered, "In Trier, beautiful girls who model for painters are called 'maîtresse d'atelier.'
"With the advent of cameras and photographers, they also began taking photo subjects. As you might imagine, some of these photos were sold to painters as reference material, while others..."
Ruhr flashed a sly grin and shook the paper bag in his hand again.
"Four licks per bag, with two photos inside!
"Others sell them for over 10 licks!"
Lumian laughed.
"Monsieur Ruhr, Madame Michel, is this the souvenir you peddle

to tourists?"
Hearing Lumian address them by name, Ruhr and Michel's expressions shifted dramatically.
They spun around, trying to escape, but Lumian was quicker and clamped down on Ruhr's shoulder.
Michel, who had weaved her way through the crowd, noticed her husband couldn't keep pace and returned, her face etched with bitterness.
"I also live at Auberge du Coq Doré. My name is Ciel," Lumian introduced himself.
Finally realizing how Lumian knew them, the couple breathed a sigh of relief and looked at him pleadingly. "What's the matter, Monsieur Ciel?"
"What kind of photos are you selling?" Lumian inquired curiously.
Ruhr responded timidly, "Scenic photos of the Srenzo River, as well as images of Trier's castles and palaces."
"No one is causing trouble for you?" Lumian asked, grinning.
Ruhr swallowed and said, "The people who buy them don't dare to open them on the spot or confront us later. They feel guilty."
"Besides, no police will bother you if you sell landscape photos." Lumian nodded. "Does anyone really sell street maîtresse d'atelier?"
"Yes," Ruhr confirmed. "Last month, the police arrested a group of photographers and art dealers. They said they confiscated over 10,000 photos. If only they could give them to us. Who knows how much we could sell them for!"
Madame Michel, also sporting a wrinkled face and hunched figure, mumbled, "There was a model staying at our inn previously, but she hasn't been around lately. Perhaps she became the mistress of some painter, or maybe she was captured to be a street maîtresse d'atelier..."
Auberge du Coq Doré has quite a variety of guests... Lumian asked with interest, "How much can you earn in a week by tricking foreigners into buying photos?"
"We sell them very cheaply. About 10 verl d'or," Ruhr replied, his gaze slightly evasive.
From the looks of it, it's more than 10 verl d'or, but not much more. I'll count it as 12 verl d'or, which is 1,200 coppet or 240 licks... 60 fools fall for it every week? Lumian surveyed the square and expressed his disdain for the average intelligence of the people there.
As for Ruhr and Michel, they took a significant risk to deceive others; yet, they only earned about 50 verl d'or a month, far less than the apprentice attendants or even laborers.

Observing their slightly hunched backs, slender frames, and wrinkled faces, Lumian understood that it wasn't that they didn't want to do more legitimate work for better pay, but rather that they couldn't handle those jobs.

With a wave of his hand, he left Suhit's steam locomotive station and headed northwest towards Quartier de l'Observatoire.

Chapter 115: Legend

The catacombs' main entrance was tucked away in Place du Purgatoire, close to the Intisian observatory. The structure enclosing the entrance was supported by grand pillars, crowned by a dome adorned with intricate stone carvings, reminiscent of a miniature memorial hall or the base of an immense mausoleum.

As Lumian approached, he noted a crowd of 20 to 30 people already assembled near the stairs leading down. Their attire varied, but most were dressed formally, both men and women alike.

A man in his thirties, sporting a blue vest, yellow pants, and a thick beard, stood before the crowd. His brown curls framed upturned eyes, and he held an unlit iron-black carbide lamp.

Addressing the gathered group, he announced loudly, "I'm Kendall, one of the catacombs' administrators. I'll be guiding you through the ossuary today.

"Does everyone have a white candle? If not, please let me know immediately."

Tourists? Lumian's eyes swept over the stone staircase behind Kendall.

It plunged down into impenetrable darkness, its end hidden from view.

Beside Kendall stood a massive wooden door, half of it emblazoned with the Sun Sacred Emblem in gold, while the other half was adorned with an intricate triangle filled with symbols of steam, levers, gears, and more.

Upon receiving confirmation, Kendall ignited his carbide lamp and led the group into the depths below. The tourists trailed behind him, some bearing lanterns.

Lumian followed, keeping a four to five-meter distance. Clutching the carbide lamp he had obtained from Ramayes, he descended the staircase at a steady pace.

Thanks to his Beyonder-enhanced hearing, Lumian easily heard Kendall's informative spiel at the front.

"After 138 steps, you'll find yourselves 26 meters below Trier's streets, surrounded by the remains of nearly 50 generations of Trieriens.

"That's a conservative estimate. In truth, the history of some of these ossuaries can be traced back to the previous epoch...

"Forty-seven years ago, there was no more space for the dead in Cimetière des Innocents or Cimetière des Prêtres. White bones lay scattered, and the stench drove nearby residents to protest daily, demanding the relocation of the cemetery...

"Ultimately, City Hall opted to go underground. They repurposed

graves from the Fourth Epoch and adjacent underground quarries, creating a vast tomb... Today, you'll be visiting but a mere fraction of it..."
Kendall's voice echoed through the silent, never-ending staircase, imbuing the atmosphere with an eerie sense of foreboding.
As Lumian continued downward, a path lined with stone pillars and walls came into view.
This passage, unlike other subterranean areas, was well-maintained and frequently repaired. It was smooth, wide, and unnervingly sinister. An icy breeze occasionally swept through the corridor.
Gas lamps were strategically placed along the path, casting a dim, yellowish light that allowed shadows to mingle with the illumination, stretching into the darkness.
Kendall, clad in his blue vest, warned the visitors once more, "Stay close and don't wander off!
"There are countless underground areas we know little about. If you get lost, it'll be nearly impossible to find you.
"Do not stray from the path once inside the tomb. There are passages that lead to deeper, more sinister chambers. The Fourth Epoch's malevolent spirits lurk within that darkness. Praise the Sun and the Light. By adhering to the routes endorsed by the padres, we can avoid all perils."
Some visitors outstretched their arms in praise of the Sun, while others traced a triangle over their chests.
After trailing Kendall and the others for nearly 200 meters, Lumian caught sight of the subterranean tomb.
Before him lay a natural boulder cave, modified over time. Its walls were adorned with intricate reliefs of skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and steam symbols.
Above the entrance, two Intisian inscriptions commanded:
"Halt!
"The Death Empire lies ahead!"
Kendall, the catacomb administrator, turned to address the visitors once more, "Extinguish your lanterns and light the white candles. Everyone must do this!
"If you'd rather not enter the catacomb, feel free to explore this area, but don't stray too far. It's all too easy to lose your bearings, and that would be a problem.
"Should you find yourself separated from the group inside the catacomb, don't panic. Locate a road sign. If there isn't one, look above and follow the black line drawn on the tomb's ceiling. It will guide you back to the main entrance..."
Soon, the lanterns were snuffed out, replaced by the flickering

glow of orange candlelight.
The visitors hoisted their white candles and trailed Kendall into the catacombs.
Lumian observed from a distance, watching as the yellowish flames merged into a stream that meandered into the darkness.
He refrained from entering. Grasping his carbide lamp, he circled the tomb's entrance, intent on locating the phony warlock, Osta Trul.
A few minutes later, Lumian discovered a small bonfire.
Beside a pillar, damp moss clung to the stone wall above.
A man was seated on a rock behind the fire, garbed in a hooded black robe. His high-bridged nose and dark brown eyes were framed by a flaxen beard that obscured his chin. He stared intently at the dancing flames.
Lumian approached and inquired, "Are you Osta Trul?"
The hooded man raised his gaze to meet Lumian's and replied in a deliberately subdued, magnetic voice, "Lost soul, why have you sought me out?"
Flames and shadows danced across Osta Trul's face, obscuring his age. He appeared to be somewhere between just below 30 and 40.
Lumian spoke earnestly, "I've heard whispers about you. They say you're a mystical Warlock who can help me resolve my dilemma."
Osta Trul responded in a low, magnetic tone, "Witchcraft is taboo. Witchcraft is a curse. I won't render aid without cause."
"What must I do?" Lumian pressed, anxiety evident in his voice.
Osta replied softly, "The essence of witchcraft lies in equivalent exchange. Reveal the nature of the help you seek first."
Equivalent exchange. Have you been reading too many novels? Lumian suppressed the urge to ridicule and antagonize him, instead adopting a pained expression.
"I've lost everyone I cared for. I feel forsaken by the world. Sleep eludes me each night. I want to forget these burdens and begin anew."
Osta Trul scrutinized Lumian's countenance, finding no trace of deception.
He nodded slightly.
"I, too, have suffered great losses. It's a curse borne of witchcraft. I can empathize with your sentiments and thoughts. Yet forgetting pain is no simple task."
"Very well..." Lumian exhaled a long sigh and turned to depart.
Osta hastily called out, "Wait. Just because it's difficult doesn't mean it's impossible."
"Really?" Lumian whipped his head back, excitement flooding his features.

Osta nodded subtly and continued, "Have you ever heard of the Samaritan Women's Spring?"
"No." Lumian shook his head.
Osta glanced at the burning bonfire and explained simply, "In one of the ossuaries within the catacombs, there's a murky spring known as the Samaritan Women's Spring, or the Fountain of Oblivion. Drink from it, and all your pain will be erased from memory.
"Of course, it's a fabrication. The spring is merely a puddle left by a construction error during the catacombs' creation. The administrators spun it into legend."
As Lumian's eyes sparkled with hope, Osta Trul carried on, "However, as a Warlock, I can reveal that deep within this subterranean realm lies a genuine Samaritan Women's Spring, hidden in a tomb believed to be a relic of the Fourth Epoch.
"Many corpses there chant: 'Drink the blissful waters of forgetfulness and be purged of primordial pain.'"
"I can help you recover it, but the principle of equivalent exchange must be honored. It will cost you 100 verl d'or."
100 verl d'or? Isn't your asking price a bit too low? How can anyone believe that procuring a legendary item as perilous as this could be genuine without demanding a few thousand verl d'or? Lumian had been listening closely, but the absurdly undervalued service left him amused.
How could such priceless spring water be worth no more than an apprentice attendant's two months' wages?
He had read about the legend of the Samaritan Women's Spring in Psychic. Aurore had murmured a word he didn't understand. Its pronunciation likely resembled 'Granny Meng.'
Psychic also asserted that the Samaritan Women's Spring was a legend fabricated by the catacomb administrators, but they were convinced the tale had its origins. The Fountain of Oblivion might genuinely exist somewhere on the Northern Continent.
Lumian's eyes widened as he hastened to Osta's side. Clasping his shoulder, he exclaimed, "Really?"
Osta brushed his hand away and nodded composedly.
"This is a Warlock's vow."
"Alright, alright!" Lumian responded, thrilled. "But I didn't bring that much money. I'll head back now and return here to find you tomorrow?"
Osta nodded approvingly.
"No problem."
Lumian expressed his gratitude profusely, seized the carbide lamp, and departed with excitement.

Once out of Osta's view, Lumian's smile vanished. He raised his right palm and sniffed the faint fragrance.

Before reaching the Quartier de l'Observatoire, he had deliberately sprayed an inferior cologne on his right hand and touched Osta's body.

Back on the surface, Lumian took cover behind a pillar, concealed himself, and waited patiently.

The sky gradually darkened. As twilight descended, he detected the faint and familiar scent of cologne.

Lumian didn't rush to pursue Osta. After a while, he emerged from his hiding spot and trailed the lingering fragrance, maintaining a distance so great he was nearly invisible.

Carriages whizzed past him, and extravagant mechanical contraptions appeared sporadically.

Chapter 116: City of Fashion

In the morning, while "shopping" at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Lumian noticed that Trier's citizens dressed rather casually, or perhaps boldly. This was evident in the women wearing short sleeves that bared their forearms or garments with cut-out shoulders that displayed their collarbones. On the other hand, there was no shortage of peculiar attire.

In the Dariège region, a warlock like Osta, donning a black robe and hood, resembled an ancient legend. It was impossible for him to walk the streets openly without being stopped by the police. In Trier, however, passersby paid him no mind.

Such appearances were all too common. People dressed in a variety of antiquated garments.

Osta Trul was undoubtedly more cautious. Periodically, he would glance over his shoulder to spot anyone suspicious, but Lumian maintained such a great distance that neither of them were within the other's line of sight.

Lumian trailed Osta from one street to the next, following the faint scent of the inferior cologne.

As gas lamps illuminated the surroundings, Osta turned into a street sheltered by glass domes and steel frames.

This place was brightly lit and lined with upscale shops. Smooth marble paved the ground, and the area bustled with pedestrians—a stark contrast to the ramshackle alleys of Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

This is the arcade Aurore mentioned? Lumian observed Osta pausing in front of a store to admire the window display. He too slowed down, scanning the area.

He quickly spotted people engaging in "unusual" behavior.

Dressed in formal attire, both men and women walked turtles of varying sizes.

The turtles inched forward, and their owners, holding a rope, trailed leisurely behind.

Upon seeing a man dressed in a black formal suit and silk top hat walking a turtle, Lumian couldn't help but inquire, "My friend, what are you doing?"

The man turned his head, revealing a powdered face.

He responded with a smile, "Foreigner, I'm simply taking a stroll, walking my turtle."

"Why a turtle?" Lumian didn't conceal his puzzlement.

The impeccably groomed gentleman appeared pleased to share his fashion philosophy. He grinned and explained, "Most Trieriens enjoy walking around leisurely, but they fail to grasp the essence

of leisure and elegance. They always walk briskly and seem rushed.
"A true stroll is slower than a turtle. Thus, we walk turtles and let them lead to emphasize our leisurely pace.
"It's a gauge to measure walking speed and a device to quantify elegance."
Lumian had to concede that Trieriens consistently expanded his perspective as a country bumpkin from Cordu.
Aurore couldn't have even written a story about walking a turtle!
"A true Trierien!" Lumian applauded, his tone dripping with sarcasm.
Regrettably, the gentleman failed to grasp his underlying message. He smiled modestly and continued to follow the turtle at a leisurely pace.
Before long, Osta reached the other end of the arcade.
Lumian waited for a moment before cautiously following.
After exiting the arcade, Osta positioned himself by the nearby public carriage stop.
Within minutes, a massive carriage, drawn by two horses, arrived.
The carriage was divided into two levels. The yellow-painted exterior bore words like "Line 7" written in Intisian. The driver donned a short green coat and a wide-brimmed hat to fend off the rain.
As the carriage came to a stop, a conductor sporting a small hat, striped shirt, and unattractive pants appeared at the open door, scrutinizing each passenger boarding the carriage as if they were criminals.
Osta was the third person to climb aboard. He chose a window seat, observing the passersby and the men and women taking their seats.
Lumian watched from a distance without approaching.
It was only when the Line 7 carriage had pulled away that he quickened his pace, practically jogging to catch up.
Given the relatively slow speed of public transportation and the rule of stopping at every station, Lumian wasn't concerned about being left behind.
As he ran, some pedestrians eyed him curiously, while a few even jogged alongside, seemingly believing this to be the latest trend.
Is there something wrong with your brains? Lumian didn't know whether to laugh or cry.
After three stops, he saw Osta Trul disembark from the public carriage. This area was already part of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Osta crossed two streets and turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches,

which Charlie had mentioned. He entered an old beige apartment building numbered 20.
Lumian halted in front of a street-side newspaper stand, picked up a paper, and casually flipped through it.
Simultaneously, he observed the entrance to the apartment building from the corner of his eye.
"It's 11 coppets for one," the newsstand owner reminded Lumian when he noticed that he was only reading and not buying.
Lumian was holding a copy of Le Petit Trierien, and without minding, he took out two 5-coppet and one 1-coppet coins and tossed them onto the other newspapers.
The newsstand owner fell silent.
Lumian continued reading the newspaper.
"City Hall discussing new price plans with the water supply company...
"Valéry slams consumerism as a fetish...
"..."
"Greatest project in human history seeks collaboration..."
The final caught Lumian's attention as he reminded him of something:
It reeked of a prankster or a swindler's ploy!
As Lumian kept an eye on the apartment, he read the corresponding content with growing interest.
"The future of humanity lies in the stars. The history of mankind was forged by the brave to explore.
"In this era of rapid technological progress, we lack civilization pioneers, visionaries with exceptional insight and foresight, and adventurers with courage.
"Last time, we were trapped in the Berserk Sea. This time, we're trapped within the atmosphere. However, human civilization and technology will undoubtedly overcome all obstacles and dangers to forge a true future.
"We seek to collaborate with all dreamers to construct a space bridge that will enable us to walk from the surface to the crimson moon.
"Point of Contact: Bulle Patil.
"Contact Method: 9th Rue Saint-Martin, 5th floor, Quartier 2."
The more Lumian read, the more amused he became. He found himself in deep contemplation.
As Cordu's Prankster King and one influenced by Aurore's eccentric ideas, he had never conceived such an outrageous, ludicrous, and absurd notion. Yet, these individuals had brazenly advertised it, as though certain they could fool a crowd.
Am I still underestimating the average human IQ? Lumian stroked

his chin with his gloved left hand.
At that moment, he saw a group of people approaching the old apartment at 20 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
The leader was a distinguished-looking gentleman in a silk top hat and black suit. He had a chiseled profile, a mahogany-colored pipe in his mouth, and a diamond ring on his left hand that sparkled under the light.
The burly men surrounding the gentleman appeared menacing. They wore either canvas shirts or dark jackets, giving off a gang-like vibe.
After they vanished into the apartment's entrance, Lumian walked over with the newspaper.
At the base of the stairs, he detected several colognes simultaneously.
One was faint and familiar—the inferior cologne he had applied to Osta. The other was more aromatic, sweet, and slightly cloying.
Musk cologne? From the man with the pipe? Lumian followed the scent all the way up to the apartment's fifth floor.
There, he saw Osta Trul.
The imposter dressed as a warlock found himself encircled by the same group of individuals. The gentleman with the diamond ring tapped his forehead with his mahogany-colored pipe, smiling politely.
"Don't think you can shake us off just because you've moved. Until you repay all the debt, I'll follow you endlessly, like a shadow."
Osta stammered fearfully, "I'll have money soon. I can return a portion to you tomorrow!"
"Very good," the 'gentleman' nodded with a smile.
He then turned the pipe and jabbed Osta's face with the still-smoldering end.
Osta recoiled in pain but dared not make a sound.
The 'gentleman' withdrew his pipe and said gently, yet firmly, "This is a little interest. If you don't pay me back tomorrow, I'll take one of your fingers."
With that, he placed his hand on his chest and bowed politely.
"See you tomorrow, my friend."
At the staircase, Lumian pursed his lips and muttered to himself, Are people and dogs learning from Gehrman now?
As Fors Wall's "The Adventurer" series gained popularity, Gehrman Sparrow impersonators cropped up across the Northern and Southern Continents. Phrases like "this is basic courtesy" and "a bestowment or a curse" spread far and wide.
As the group approached, Lumian lowered his head and stepped aside, acting like an ordinary tenant encountering gangsters.

Chaotic footsteps echoed as they descended floor by floor, soon giving way to silence.
Lumian glanced in Osta Trul's direction, noting that he had already retreated to his room and closed the wooden door.
After some contemplation, Lumian flexed his gloved left hand and adjusted his hat. He walked out of the staircase and approached Osta's door.
Bang! Bang! Bang! He raised his hand and knocked on the door.
After a moment, Osta opened the door, his face a mix of shock and fear. He stammered shakily,
"I really can't get that money until tomorrow..."
Before he could finish, Lumian's figure came sharply into focus in his eyes.
Lumian spread his arms and asked with a beaming smile, "Surprised?"
"You, you, you..." Osta backed away as if he'd seen a ghost.
Lumian followed him into the room and smiled at Osta Trul.
"I truly wish to forget the pain of the past, but I'm also a cautious person. I'm afraid of being swindled and, worse, being mocked as a fool."

Chapter 117: Remuneration

Osta forced a smile.
"I'm not lying. There really is a Samaritan Women's Spring!"
"Is that so?" Lumian approached Osta with a grin and said, "When the time comes, take a sip first. If it's useful, you'll forget that I haven't paid you. If it's useless, why should I pay you?"
For a moment, Osta was at a loss for words. He could only smile and nod.
"Trust me, trust me..."
Suddenly, he looked past Lumian, his eyes widening in terror.
Lumian 'instinctively' turned to look at the door, but there was no one there.
Seizing the opportunity, Osta ducked and made a break for the open door.
Thud!
Osta tripped over Lumian's right foot, which had swiftly extended, and crashed to the ground. His nose bridge turned blue, and his gaunt face swelled.
Lumian slowly closed the door, pulled up a chair, and sat down. He looked down at Osta, who was feigning death on the floor, and said, "Don't tell me you have high spiritual perception and 'saw' a bizarre creature behind me. Did you rush to the door to help me deal with it?"
Osta was dumbstruck for a moment before rising to his feet and nodding repeatedly.
"That's right, that's right!"
Lumian smiled and glanced at the rectangular wooden table against the wall.
Silver dagger, white candles, a few small bottles filled with different liquids or empty, two imitation goatskins, and a paper box emitting the fragrance of plants were strewn across it.
He has a certain amount of mysticism knowledge... Lumian shifted his gaze back to the uneasy Osta and asked, "Who was that guy with the pipe just now?"
"Baron Brignais!" Osta replied hastily. "He's the leader of the Savoie Mob in the market district."
Savoie was the name of an inland province in the Intis Republic, bordering the provinces of Haut-Hornacis and Bas-Hornacis. It was rich in mineral resources and had a valiant folk culture.
"A baron? There are still barons?" Lumian asked, amused.
Ever since Emperor Roselle's death and the establishment of the Republic, aristocratic titles had vanished from daily life.
Osta said fearfully, "That's a nickname he gave himself. Perhaps

his ancestors held such an aristocratic title."
Lumian leaned back in his chair and asked casually, "Why did he come to you? Do you owe them money?"
Seeing Lumian's harmless demeanor, as though he was chatting with a friend, Osta relaxed a little despite his fear.
He said bitterly, "In order to b-buy an item, I borrowed 3,000 verl d'or from a loan shark. Later, that man sold the debt to Brignais.
"I paid back at least 3,000 verl d'or, but he told me there was still 2,000 in interest!"
"If you drag on for another two or three months, you won't owe 2,000, but 4,000." Lumian watched Osta's expression crumble, the air of mystery gone.
He then lowered his voice and said in a beguiling tone, "If I were you, I'd find a way to draw Brignais and his crew into a quarry pit. Then, I'd bring down the stone layer above, burying them for eternity.
"No creditors, no debts."
The more Osta listened, the more panic-stricken he became. He stared at Lumian as if he were a demon.
He had a suspicion that Lumian had already plotted such a scheme, but with Osta Trul as the intended target, not Brignais!
"That's murder! A crime!" Osta exclaimed in terror.
"Keep it down. You wouldn't want to lose your voice permanently, would you?" Lumian warned him with a smile. "So you do realize that's a crime? Did anyone ever tell you that fraud is a crime too?"
Osta was at a loss for words.
Lumian stood up and dusted off his gloves.
"I'm just kidding. I was testing your character."
"What?" Osta was baffled.
Lumian wouldn't reveal that his true motive was to establish an ice-cold, ruthless persona in Osta's mind. It would come in handy during future "negotiations."
Forced trust was still trust!
"Congratulations on passing my test. This proves you're not completely without scruples." Lumian grinned and spread his arms.
He quickly steered the conversation back on course.
"What did you borrow so much money for?"
He glanced around, adding, "Doesn't seem like there's anything valuable here..."
Osta instinctively wanted to spout a lie but remembered Lumian's warning.
He trembled and said, "Do... do you know about potions?"
"You're really a Beyonder?" Lumian chuckled.

Seeing that Lumian knew about Beyonders and potions, Osta breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad he hadn't lied.
Any fabricated story would be riddled with holes in front of a true Beyonder, easily exposed. If caught, Osta might end up "sleeping forever" in some Underground Trier hideout tonight.
Taking two deep breaths, Osta continued, "A few months ago, I borrowed 3,000 verl d'or from a loan shark to purchase the main ingredient for a potion. Combined with the 4,000 verl d'or I'd saved, I successfully transformed from an ordinary person into a Beyonder."
"Which Sequence do you belong to? You can't even handle a few thugs?" Lumian asked with feigned suspicion.
Osta looked defeated.
"I'm a Sequence 9 Secrets Suppliant."
"It doesn't sound weak." Lumian could only gauge by the potion's name.
Osta lamented in frustration, "I thought Secrets Suppliants were powerful too. The seller even claimed it would allow me to see the world's truth.
"In the end, aside from heightened spiritual perception, all I got was some impractical sacrificial knowledge and ritual magic. I can occasionally sense the presence of mysterious entities, scaring myself witless, but I can't even defeat a thug!"
"The ritual magic should come in handy," Lumian remarked knowingly.
Osta looked close to tears.
"I'm well-versed in mysticism. I'm a follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. How can I pray to an unknown entity? That's too risky!
"Sigh, there are some honorific names in the potion's knowledge, but they're all concealed entities. Just hearing them is terrifying. I wouldn't dare invoke depravity, true kin, or the gaze of fate!"
He glanced at Lumian and feigned determination.
"But I've considered it. If Baron Brignais and his goons corner me again, I'll pray to the hidden existence and gain strength!"
He was ostensibly talking about Baron Brignais, but his true intent was to caution Lumian against forcing him into a corner.
Lumian studied Osta's uneasy face and agreed, "That's a wise decision. Baron Brignais and his crew underestimate a Beyonder. If I were in their shoes, I wouldn't give you the chance to reach a dead end."
He then smiled at Osta.
"You'd be dead before that happens."
Osta opened his mouth but closed it again, his expression more pained than crying.

Lumian walked over to the wooden table and toyed with the empty bottles.
"You've moved several times, but Baron Brignais keeps finding you. I suspect he or the Savoie Mob have Beyonders on their side."
Osta gasped in shock.
Lumian picked up the silver dagger from the table, twirling it as he said to Osta, "I can offer you 100 verl d'or as a reward."
"Huh?" Osta was baffled once more.
He realized he couldn't keep up with Lumian's thought process.
"You, you still want the spring water from the Samaritan Women's Spring?" he ventured.
Lumian grinned and replied, "Tell me, does it really exist?"
Eyeing Lumian's amused gaze, Osta hesitated for a moment before admitting, "I'm not sure."
Lumian nodded in satisfaction.
"What I want is for you to take me to the gathering you mentioned, the one where you bought the potion's main ingredient. The reward is 100 verl d'or."
Lumian made this request partly because Madam Magician's mission might be connected to the gathering involving Beyonder materials, and partly because he needed a similar event to acquire weapons, materials, Sealed Artifacts, and arcane knowledge.
Osta swallowed hard.
"I-I can try, but I'll need the gathering organizer's approval."
"No problem." Lumian took out a gold coin and beckoned Osta over. "This Louis d'or is your reward for asking. I'll give you the remaining 80 verl d'or when I can attend the gathering."
Osta hadn't anticipated that his beating would turn into a job offer. He was momentarily dumbstruck.
After a few seconds, he cautiously approached the wooden table and took the 20 verl Louis d'or. He told Lumian, "I'm not sure when I'll get an answer, but no later than next Wednesday. I spend the day near the catacombs and sleep here at night. You can find me anytime."
Lumian nodded, smiling as he raised the silver dagger in his hand and plunged it into Osta's shoulder.
Blood spurted out, and Osta staggered back in terror. He leaned against the wall and cried out anxiously, "Don't kill me! I'm not lying!"
Lumian picked up a glass bottle from the wooden table and approached Osta with a smile.
"Don't worry. If I wanted you dead, I would've done it by now.
"This is called a blood oath. I'm very wary of deception and betrayal."

As Lumian spoke, he held the empty glass bottle to Osta's wound, allowing the blood to trickle in.
During this process, he smiled at Osta and said, "You have a strong grasp of mysticism. You should know what blood means in the hands of others. Don't lie to me."
"Curse..." For a moment, Osta couldn't decide whether to rejoice that he hadn't been killed on the spot or despair that his blood now belonged to a man more dangerous than Baron Brignais.
Lumian said nothing more. He tightened the bottle cap, tore a strip of cloth from the room, and tossed it to Osta.
"Bandage your wound yourself."
He wasn't familiar with any Beyonder curses, but he could test if expired blood could activate Fallen Mercury's fate-exchanging ability.
Even if it didn't work, all he needed to do was convince Osta that he knew how to cast curses.
Lumian glanced at Osta, who was desperately trying to staunch the bleeding, and casually asked, "What's your plan for dealing with Baron Brignais?"
"With this Louis d'or and some money I've saved, I should be able to appease them for a week," Osta said with a bitter smile. "They won't get a single coppet if they push their debtors to death."

Lumian nodded, asking, "You mentioned that your spiritual perception is quite advanced?"
Osta briefly fell into a trance before a lingering fear spread across his face.
He took a moment to compose himself, then said, "That seems to be a trait of the Secrets Suppliant. I can sense hidden creatures lurking in the dark depths, and I can also feel the real world wrapped in a thick veil. Beyond that veil, emotionless eyes watch us..."
As he finished, Osta panted heavily. Lumian patiently waited for the impostor warlock to catch his breath. Nearly a minute later, Osta exhaled, saying, "In the market district and Quartier de l'Observatoire, it's fine, but in Underground Trier, I can often sense the end of certain paths. In places I can't see, some creature beckons me to come closer.
"I wonder what would happen to me if I truly stepped into that darkness.
A fine mystical sensor indeed... Lumian silently mocked his Hunter's Spirit Vision while also feeling that a Secrets Suppliant wasn't as useless as Osta claimed.
Osta continued, "Sometimes, when I see tourists entering the catacombs with white candles, I get these delusions. I think it's a ritual that forms a magical bond with some hidden entity, protecting the tourists from being devoured by the darkness or spirited away by the dead."
Lumian was taken aback, inwardly sighing.
In terms of mysticism, a Secrets Suppliant is quite potent... It's just that they're not skilled in combat...
From Osta's account, Lumian suspected that carrying a lit white candle into the catacombs was indeed a ritual that allowed visitors to evade the hidden perils there.
The tomb administrators likely knew this, but in pursuit of profit, they not only kept silent but also encouraged higher-ups to promote the catacombs as a tourist attraction.
Lumian remembered his sister Aurore's frequent lament: "Money changes people."
I wonder, at a lower level, which one can bring about a person's change more effectively: potions, boons, or money... Lumian muttered silently with a teasing attitude.
He then asked Osta, "Have you sensed any danger lurking in the market district's darkness?"
Osta's face shifted as he replied in a grave tone, "I dare not

approach the burned-out house in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman."
At the edge of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, near Rue des Blouses Blanches, stood a scorched, uninhabited house. The district's Members of Parliament had long demanded its demolition and conversion into a commercial building, but for some reason, the proposal never reached City Hall's agenda. Even after a decade, the six-story eyesore still stood.
I didn't feel anything when I passed by this morning... Lumian turned and headed for the door.
"I'll visit you again. I hope you won't disappoint me."
Osta, his shoulder wound now bandaged, flashed an ingratiating smile.
"Rest assured, I'll provide you with an answer."
After leaving Osta's room, Lumian suddenly quickened his pace. In a blink, he crouched in the shadows of the stairs leading to the rooftop, silently eyeing the tightly shut wooden door.
Nearly half an hour later, having confirmed that nothing was amiss, he slowly descended the stairs with Le Petit Trierien.
It was then that he finally heard his stomach growl.
Gazing at the makeshift barricade of rocks, logs, mud slabs, and assorted items with a narrow opening as a passage, Lumian spotted a nearby bakery and spent three licks to buy half a kilogram of croissants.
He also sampled Trier's distinctive fruit juice soda.
The effervescent liquid swirled as the currant syrup dispersed like clouds within it. The concoction set him back 13 coppet.
If he returned the soda bottle, he could reclaim 3 coppet.
...
Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.
Before Lumian could enter the basement bar, the noise and chaos reached his ears.
Just past nine o'clock, nearly twenty people packed the intimate space. They either sat at the bar or huddled around a few small round tables, their attention riveted on the bartender.
The stylish, ponytailed bartender explained the contraption on the bar to an unfamiliar male patron.
"This is called the Idiot Instrument. It tests your intelligence.
"Care to give it a shot?"
The man in the dark jacket seemed intrigued and asked, "How do I try?"
The bartender gestured at the exposed rubber tube with a solemn expression.
"Blow here until bubbles form in the glass jar above.

"Your ability to produce bubbles and their size determine the final test results."
Without hesitation, the man picked up the rubber hose and blew into it.
As light-green bubbles emerged from the glass jar atop the machine, everyone in the bar leaped to their feet, applauding wildly and exclaiming, "Welcome, idiot!"
The man looked bewildered for a moment before grasping the joke. His face flushed crimson.
He shot a fierce glare at the bartender and the rowdy patrons before stifling his anger and muttering, "Interesting. This prank is really something. I'll bring a few friends to try it tomorrow."
Is this what friends are for? Lumian sneered inwardly. He pulled a barstool over and sat down, telling the bartender, "Give me the usual—a glass of fennel absinthe."
The bartender grinned. "This one's on me. Your machine's fantastic. Word of its mystical powers has spread, and people have come specifically to check it out. My business has doubled since then.
"By the way, I'm Pavard Neeson, the owner of this bar and an amateur painter. What should I call you?"
"Ciel," Lumian replied, his smile unwavering.
He noticed the difference between Trieriens and the villagers of Cordu.
In Cordu, anyone who fell victim to such a prank would seek revenge. But Trieriens enjoyed finding new "victims" and watching them get caught, easing their own embarrassment.
"You've got a keen brain. You're better at pranks than many Trieriens." To the native bartender, Pavard Neeson, this compliment was high praise.
He slid a slender glass filled with a light green, hallucinogenic liquid toward Lumian.
Taking a sip of the absinthe, Lumian savored the faint bitterness that stirred his senses and made him feel alive.
He closed his eyes, soaking in the sensation before asking, "I have a few friends who arrived in Trier before me, but I don't have their contact information. Is there a way to find them?"
Pavard Neeson wiped a glass.
"If you're wealthy, advertise with the Journal de Trier. If you're not, hire a bounty hunter or information broker to see if they'll take the job. If you're broke, go back to your room and sleep. Maybe one day, you'll bump into your friends on the street."
"Any recommendations? A reliable bounty hunter or information broker?" Lumian wasn't short on cash for now and might receive a

'donation' from a generous benefactor at any moment, but advertising in newspapers was beyond his means. It'd cost at least 3,000 verl d'or. Smaller publications might be cheaper, but they were ineffective.
Moreover, he couldn't risk alarming Guillaume Bénet and Madame Pualis if they read the papers.
Pavard nodded, saying, "Anthony Reid lives in Room 5 on the hotel's third floor. You can pay him a visit tomorrow.
"He's a retired military man turned information broker. Highly trustworthy."
Lumian took note of the room number and name. He lifted the absinthe, swirling it gently before raising his glass to honor the bartender.
...
Upon returning to Room 207, Lumian didn't waste any time resting.
He drew the tattered curtains and performed the Summoning Dance in the cramped space.
His goal was to see what strange creatures he could attract in Auberge du Coq Doré and Rue Anarchie, preparing for potential future attacks, pursuits, or ambushes.
According to Osta, aside from the burned-out building, there were no particularly dangerous locations in the market district. Moreover, it was quite a distance from Rue Anarchie, making it unlikely for it to be affected by a Sequence 9 equivalent—Dancer. After all, this wasn't the ruins of Cordu Village, where the power of inevitability was pervasive.
Disregarding the more dangerous ones and those that Dancers couldn't attract, Lumian believed that even if the strange creatures that appeared later were stronger than him, it would be nearly impossible for them to force themselves on him. The bluish-black symbol representing the great existence and the black thorn pattern from inevitability would be enough to deter them from acting recklessly.
In a dance that alternated between madness and distortion, Lumian's spirituality merged with the stirred power of nature, stealthily spreading in all directions.
Before long, he sensed watchful eyes upon him. Several translucent, blurry figures floated around the room.
Some resembled humans, seemingly residual obsessions lingering after death. Others were grotesque, appearing like bottles or stacked meatballs, possibly originating from the corresponding spirit world.
Lumian didn't recognize any of them and couldn't determine their

traits or abilities.
At that moment, a figure emerged from the tattered curtains.
Slightly translucent, it was a woman with long turquoise hair interwoven with green leaves that enveloped its body and concealed vital areas. The rest of its fair, smooth skin was exposed, setting one's heart racing and imagination ablaze.
With emerald-green eyes, red lips, and an exquisite, alluring face, a single glance at Lumian stirred an inexplicable excitement within him.

Chapter 119: Strange Creature

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt his hair stand on end as a chill ran down his spine. He experienced a strong sense of impending danger.

Subconsciously, he pulled out Fallen Mercury from his waist, ready to rip off the black cloth wrapped around it at a moment's notice.

The translucent figure with turquoise hair and leafy coverings floated in midair, scrutinizing Lumian in the room. Its emerald-green eyes shifted between a misty and smiling expression, reminiscent of a deep vortex enticing the human soul to sink into it.

On one hand, Lumian experienced a familiar yet foreign urge that swept through his mind, disrupting most of his thoughts. On the other hand, he couldn't help but feel fear, akin to a flying insect encountering a spider spinning its web.

He slowed down his dance, prepared to stop at any moment.

The translucent female figure displayed an eager expression, but it instinctively sensed that something was amiss and hesitated to approach Lumian.

Sometimes it leaned forward, sometimes it retreated into the curtains, but ultimately, it did nothing.

After Lumian finished his Summoning Dance, he heard a faint sound in his ears. It was so close it seemed like it was right next door, causing the strange creatures lingering in the room to vanish one by one.

The last to leave was the female figure with turquoise hair and leafy coverings. It appeared both reluctant and perplexed.

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and closed his eyes, quietly listening to the indistinct voices within him.

He couldn't make out a single word but yearned to hear each one clearly.

After a moment, Lumian opened his eyes and gazed at the window obscured by the tattered curtain. He muttered to himself, *What was that?*

His intuition told him that the translucent female figure was far more powerful than the other summoned strange creatures. It wasn't something Beyonders at his level could handle.

If not for the corruption sealed within his body and the bluish-black pattern on his chest deterring spiritual creatures from subconsciously approaching him even without activation, Lumian suspected something might have happened to him.

This piqued his curiosity.

How do other Dancers survive?

He had only dared to perform the Summoning Dance after confirming the area wasn't too dangerous, yet something nearly happened. *How could other Dancers avoid such risks?*

Is it because I obtained my boon through theft and lack some mystical knowledge, or is it because other Dancers can only attract strange creatures similar to themselves? Additionally, the Summoning Dance comes from a hidden existence, so there shouldn't be any problems under normal circumstances? Lumian pondered for a moment. The more he thought about it, the more he felt he was the anomaly.

He believed that the corruption in his body was on an extremely high level. Even sealed, it could occasionally attract strange and perilous entities.

Thankfully, the corruption also provides protection... Lumian exhaled, stowed away Fallen Mercury, and lit the iron-black carbide lamp. He sat at the wooden table and flipped through Aurore's notebook.

Reading the mysticism notebook from back to front was excruciating. Lacking the corresponding knowledge, he would occasionally feel illiterate. He had no choice but to take out Aurore's earliest notebook and memorize the corresponding symbols' symbolism and mystical meaning.

However, Lumian couldn't sit down and learn bit by bit from front to back. He believed that if Aurore's witchcraft notebook truly concealed crucial information, it would definitely be in the content from the past year or two when abnormalities gradually appeared in Cordu Village and the shepherds began their "hunt."

After nearly two hours of struggling with the knowledge known as Lightning, Lumian admitted defeat and decided to continue the next night.

He washed up briefly and lay on the bed.

Recalling the strange creature he had just summoned, Lumian placed Fallen Mercury beside the pillow, feeling apprehensive.

Before leaving Cordu, he had inspected the wicked pewter-black dirk and confirmed that the fate it had exchanged from the flaming monster was "pain from immolation."

The darkness gradually deepened, but Rue Anarchie never experienced a moment of peace. Singing, shouting, cursing, fighting, chasing, coughing, crying, and exercising filled the air, composing a nocturnal symphony.

Lumian had grown accustomed to the noise, which even made him feel alive.

Unknowingly, he drifted off to sleep.

At 6 a.m., the distant cathedral chimed, reminiscent of Cordu.

Lumian woke up punctually but was reluctant to open his eyes.
After a few minutes, he sat up and fastened Fallen Mercury to his waist.
His dreams had been chaotic throughout the night, but nothing out of the ordinary occurred.
"Am I overthinking it?" Lumian muttered.
He opened the door and walked into the nearest washroom. Using the morning light streaming through the window, he examined himself in the mirror.
Compared to the same moment the day before, he hadn't changed at all.
The color and length of his hair were external factors and wouldn't reset with his physical condition.
Lumian bent down and brushed his teeth.
As he rinsed his mouth, he caught sight of Charlie entering from the corner of his eye.
"Don't you live on the fifth floor?" Lumian spat out the liquid and turned to ask Charlie.
Charlie had changed into a yellowed white shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his elbows. He yawned and said, "Can you believe it? Those guys are already up before six. The washroom on the fifth floor is packed!"
He then grinned.
"I still like this washroom on the second floor the most. Do you know why? It's clean!
"Although that bastard Laurent has very high eyebrows and doesn't know how to help his mother at all, he has his strengths. He loves cleanliness. As long as he's in the apartment, he cleans the room every day and takes care of the washroom too. Haha, could it be that he can't use the toilet if it's dirty?"
So he's the one cleaning... Lumian was surprised.
His impression of the young man named Laurent had been that he was cold, haughty, and impeccably dressed. He clearly thought highly of himself and seemed oblivious to his mother's plight. He didn't strike Lumian as someone who'd clean a bathroom.
Previously, Lumian had assumed that the other tenants on the second floor had grown fed up with the landlord's penny-pinching ways and had taken it upon themselves to clean their shared spaces.
Noticing Charlie's haggard face, as though he'd been up all night, Lumian grinned and asked,
"Did you hit up Rue de la Muraille last night?"
Rue de la Muraille was Trier's infamous red-light district.
"How can I afford to go to Rue de la Muraille? But I'll definitely go

there one of these days!" Charlie clenched his teeth and continued, "I got back to the hotel at 10 p.m. last night. Then I went to the underground bar and drank with the guys till midnight. In the wee hours, I even had a... shall we say, quite a vivid dream. Ciel, our names sound the same, but they're spelled differently. Can you imagine how ecstatic I was in that dream? And when I woke up, how crushed and how... uh, uh..."
"Empty?" Lumian supplied the adjective.
"Yes, yes, yes!" Charlie walked to the toilet and unfastened his belt.
His already narrow eyes crinkled with satisfaction.
Lumian pinched his nose and scoffed.
"You had a wet dream?"
Charlie shivered, shook his right hand, and laughed.
"It was the most lifelike dream I've ever had. The woman in it was far more beautiful than any on Rue de la Muraille. She was so tender and passionate. I never wanted to wake up."
"Well, clearly you couldn't hold out for too long. Waking up was a mercy," Lumian jested.
Charlie didn't bother to argue, and instead said earnestly,
"I'm planning to head to Rue du Rossignol on Sundays after I get paid and when I'm off work. There are a few dance halls there with some affordable pussies. A coworker told me that I only need 52 coppet to treat myself.
"But right now, I've lost interest."
Suddenly, Charlie's excitement surged. Lowering his voice, he confided in Lumian,
"You know what? A wealthy guest at the hotel has been treating me really well, asking me to deliver food and help tidy up the room."
"A man?" Lumian inquired with a hint of mischief.
Charlie hurriedly shook his head.
"No, it's a lady. I think she's taken a liking to me. I'm torn. If she makes a proposal, should I compromise my principles? You know these sorts of things are pretty common in Trier. If she's my ticket to my first big payday, I could soon own my own hotel."
"I figured you wouldn't hesitate." Though they'd only known each other for two days, Lumian was convinced that Charlie's moral compass was quite flexible.
Charlie sighed, visibly troubled, and admitted, "She's in her fifties."
Lumian let out a long "oh" and his expression conveyed his thoughts.
Bidding Charlie goodbye, Lumian returned to his room to change into a jacket, pants, and other attire suited for Rue Anarchie. He spent 6 coppet on a scallion pancake and 1 lick on half a liter of

Apple Whiskey Sour. Settling into a corner of the street, he leisurely ate his breakfast.
Shadows from the buildings on either side cloaked him as he relished the flavors of onions and flour, observing the hawkers, women shopping for groceries, hustling workers, children scavenging for trash, and a barricade in a nearby alley.
It was 9 a.m. when Lumian finally rose, dusted himself off, and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He climbed to the third floor and knocked on Room 5's door.
The information broker, Anthony Reid, resided here.
After a sequence of knocks, a composed male voice with a West Midseashire Coast accent replied, "Please come in."
Lumian turned the handle and pushed the door open. The first thing that hit him was a faintly acrid, minty odor, likely meant to repel insects.
Then, he saw a man in his forties seated by the bed.
The man wore a military-green shirt, matching pants, and laceless leather boots. His hair was cropped to a fine buzz cut.
He didn't possess the tidy, efficient air of a veteran. His light yellow hairline had receded considerably, leaving a vast expanse of forehead. His face had grown plump, his beard meticulously shaven. His skin was slightly oily and his nose pores clogged. He appeared somewhat guileless and unsophisticated.
As Anthony Reid turned to face Lumian, his dark brown eyes mirrored Lumian's figure.
For some reason, Lumian suddenly felt a twinge of unease.

Chapter 120: Lunatic's Ravings

Anthony Reid regarded Lumian coolly and inquired, "What's the problem?"

"I heard from Pavard that you're a reliable information broker." Lumian quickly disclosed his source to avoid wasting time on mutual probing.

With his plump face, Anthony Reid nodded knowingly and gestured towards a chair at the center of the room.

"What information do you need? Or rather, what information would you like me to uncover?"

Lumian felt a twinge of unease as he faced Anthony Reid, who exuded an air of honesty and dependability. He took a seat and stated succinctly, "I'm searching for two individuals."

"Names, appearances, and distinguishing features." Anthony Reid shot a glance at Lumian's left hip.

Lumian reflected for a moment before answering, "One is Guillaume Bénet, formerly a padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. The other is Pualis de Roquefort. Over a month ago, she arrived in Trier with her husband, Béost, their butler Louis Lund, and her lady's maid, Cathy.

"I don't have any pictures of them. All I can tell you is that Guillaume Bénet has short black hair and blue eyes. He possesses a solemn demeanor and strong ambitions. His most notable feature is his aquiline nose. Pualis has long, brown hair and bright brown eyes. Her eyebrows are lighter and thinner, and she exudes an elegant yet alluring aura..."

Anthony Reid listened intently before rising from his chair. He crossed the room to a wooden table near the window, opened a drawer, and retrieved a stack of white paper and a sharpened pencil.

In no time, he sketched two portraits.

"See if these resemble them." Anthony Reid handed the sketches to Lumian.

Lumian inspected the drawings and was struck by their vivid, lifelike quality. Aside from the absence of color, they were nearly indistinguishable from photographs.

He looked up at Anthony Reid in astonishment, remarking, "Uncanny. How can you reproduce their likeness so accurately based on my brief description?"

He had assumed Anthony Reid would draft several sketches for him to review before finalizing the portraits.

Anthony Reid cracked a rare smile.

"I recreated the images from the official wanted posters.

"The authorities are searching for them as well."
No wonder... Suddenly, it all made sense to Lumian.
Both Padre Guillaume Bénet and Madame Pualis were devotees of evil gods who had been granted boons. Once Ryan and his companions reported the situation, it was bound to attract the necessary attention!
With this realization, Lumian's disquiet grew.
I must be wanted too... Did Anthony Reid see my portrait? Does he recognize me? Trying to maintain his composure, Lumian queried the information broker, "I'm not surprised. I want to know the value of their bounties."
"Guillaume Bénet has a bounty of 20,000 verl d'or. Each piece of information is worth 500 verl d'or. The same goes for Pualis," Anthony Reid replied nonchalantly.
Lumian smirked. "If you uncover any useful information, you can cash in on the bounty twice."
He was implying that Anthony could claim one share from the authorities and another from him.
Anthony nodded in agreement.
"I'll take your assignment. 500 verl d'or, with 100 upfront.
"These are my terms. If you can't accept them, find another information broker or bounty hunter."
Lumian knew there was no room for negotiation. He could only nod slightly and concede, "No problem."
Just as he was about to hand over the money, a gunshot suddenly erupted from outside the window.
Anthony Reid's entire body shuddered as if confronted with his mortal nemesis. He instinctively ducked beneath the wooden table for cover.
Lumian was taken aback.
Wasn't this reaction a bit extreme? Wasn't this typical of life in Rue Anarchie?
Gunshots, brawls, and large-scale skirmishes were commonplace here. Those who lived in this area should have adapted by now, only needing to steer clear of the windows to avoid stray bullets.
Before long, the commotion died down.
Anthony Reid took a few seconds to regain his composure before emerging from under the table.
He offered Lumian a sheepish grin and explained, "I apologize. A few years back during the war, I suffered from post-traumatic stress on the battlefield and had no choice but to retire and return to Trier."
Then why choose to live in Rue Anarchie, where gunfire was a regular occurrence? Lumian didn't press further. He had no

interest in Anthony Reid's psychological issues.
He withdrew a 50-verl d'or note and gently traced his finger over the image of Levanx, the bustling commercial streets, and the silhouettes of passing merchants.
Feeling the remaining texture, Lumian handed the grayish-blue banknote, two Louis d'or, and two five-verl coins engraved with the Sunbird to Anthony Reid.
His wallet felt a third lighter, and he couldn't shake the sense of money slipping through his fingers.
As he examined the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman behind the banknotes, Anthony Reid bent his finger and flicked the surface to verify its authenticity under the sunlight.
Satisfied, he pocketed the money and inquired, "Do you want to check in with me periodically for updates, or should I have an address? If I come across any information, I can drop it off at your place."
"I'm in room 207." Lumian knew he couldn't conceal his stay at the Auberge du Coq Doré from Anthony Reid, so he provided his room number.
Upon leaving Room 305, Lumian's expression grew increasingly solemn as he muttered to himself, I need to be extra cautious in the coming days to prevent Anthony Reid from betraying me... Perhaps I should find an opportunity to demonstrate my strength in front of him, convincing him that I won't let any transgressions go unpunished.
As Lumian mulled over his thoughts, he made his way towards the stairs.
Suddenly, he heard someone exclaiming, laughing, and sobbing, "I'm dying, I'm dying!"
Lumian glanced in the direction of the voice and spotted a man squatting by the door of Room 310.
The man wore a filthy linen shirt and yellow pants. His unkempt black hair cascaded down to his shoulders.
At that moment, he clutched his head with both hands and stared at the ground, repeatedly muttering,
"I'm dying, I'm dying!"
His voice oscillated between fear and insanity.
The occasionally lucid madman that Charlie mentioned? Lumian sized him up for a few seconds, leaned in, and asked curiously, "Why do you think you're about to die? Do you have a terminal illness?"
Without raising his head, the man continued to yell, "I'm dying, I'm dying!"
Lumian smirked and strode past him into Room 310, its wooden

door flung wide open.
The room's layout mirrored his own in 207. It was relatively tidy, save for the inevitable bugs that couldn't be evicted.
Lumian's gaze swept over the kerosene lamp, a multitude of books, fountain pens, suitcases, and other belongings. The madman stood up and declared in a daze, "This is my territory."
"I know," Lumian replied with a grin. "But if you're about to die and you don't have any children or relatives, why not use your inheritance to help poor neighbors like us?"
He observed that the madman was only in his late twenties. His bushy, black beard had been left unshaven for who knows how long, causing his blue eyes to appear as if they were buried deep within a forest.
The madman stared blankly for a few moments before clutching his hair and screaming in anguish, "They're all dead. They're all dead! I saw the Montsouris ghost. They're all dead. I'm about to die too!"
The Montsouris ghost? Lumian finally heard something distinct from the madman.
He had deliberately provoked the other man to see if he could elicit a different reaction.
The positive feedback made him feel as if he were making progress with digesting the potion.
One of the acting principles of a Provoker is that provocation is only a means and not an end? Lumian studied the madman thoughtfully and inquired, "Why would the Montsouris ghost cause them to die and push you to death's door?"
The madman lowered his head and mumbled, "Anyone who sees the Montsouris ghost will die. Their family will die too. They'll die within a year!"
Is this the madman's delusion, or did something like this actually happen? If so, was it a curse? Lumian prodded,
"Where did you encounter the Montsouris ghost?"
"Underground, underground! It's beneath the market district!" The madman crouched down again, his back pressed against the wall as he hugged his trembling body.
The underworld beneath the market district? Couldn't he just report it to the two Churches and have them send people to eradicate the unclean beings? Lumian mused silently.
Seeing that the madman had reverted to his "I'm dying, I'm dying" state, he abandoned his pursuit of the matter, exited Room 310, and descended the stairs.
Tomorrow was Sunday. Lumian planned to visit the Mason café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique at noon to familiarize himself with

the area. In the afternoon, he'd head to the underground cemetery to see if Osta had received a "reply" from the gathering's organizer.
The alleys around Rue Anarchie were cluttered with obstacles made of rocks, wood, branches, and assorted debris. Even on the main road, one could stumble upon them from time to time. However, there was already a path wide enough for two carriages to pass through.
These were called street barricades, and they could be found in many districts. Some bore the marks of smoke and fire, while others still had remnants of dried blood. They were a unique feature of Trier, contrasting starkly with the pedestrian streets of the arcade.
Lumian stepped over a low point at the edge of a barricade, emerged from the dim alley, and entered the street.
He then made his way towards the public carriage sign, intending to take such transportation to Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
As he walked, Lumian spotted numerous vagrants lying in corners, basking in the sun and picking at lice. All were filthy, gaunt, and devoid of energy.
This brought back memories of his own days as a vagrant.
Unlike the Loen Kingdom, which prohibited vagrants from sleeping on streets and in parks, the Intis Republic had no such rules in place. However, they were forbidden from entering fee-paying establishments or private venues. They often mocked Loen for its lack of culture.
Lost in thought, Lumian's eyes narrowed.
He sensed someone was tailing him!

Chapter 121: Salle de Bal Brise

Lumian didn't swivel or hesitate, striding confidently toward the public carriage sign.
He scanned the area nonchalantly, his eyes settling on the glass window of a nearby café.
Him in a dark jacket was reflected there, and not far from him, another figure in a canvas jacket and a cap.
Lumian averted his eyes, abruptly quickening his pace as if trying to catch the departing double-decker carriage.
As expected, he felt the man in the blue cap break into a jog.
The public carriage glided away silently, turning down the street.
Lumian knew he couldn't catch up and halted abruptly.
Using the shop windows lining the street, Lumian caught sight of the cap-wearing man stumbling to a stop. Seizing the moment, he spun around and surveyed the dance hall opposite.
As Lumian passed the public horse stop sign, he gave an almost imperceptible nod. Continuing on, he ducked into a shadowy alley blocked by a barricade.
The man in the cap pursued him, vaulting the ramshackle barricade with ease, but Lumian had disappeared.
His quarry seemed to have evaporated into thin air.
Just as the cap-wearing man prepared to give chase, Lumian sprang from his hiding place in the corner, like a predator pouncing on its prey. He seized the man's shoulders and yanked him backward, driving his knee into his back.
Crack!
Lumian's knee connected with the man's waist, contorting his face in pain and buckling his knees.
He collapsed to the ground with a thud, stirring up a cloud of dust.
Lumian crouched and gripped the back of the stalker's head. In a gravelly voice, he demanded, "Who got you to follow me?"
"I'm not! I'm just taking a shortcut!" the man in the cap protested anxiously.
Lumian chuckled, grabbed his head, and slammed it into the ground.
The man in the cap howled in pain, his forehead bruised, swollen, and bloody.
"Who sent you to follow me?" Lumian pressed.
The man in the cap felt indignant.
"I'm not following you! I don't even know you!"
"Alright." Lumian released his grip.
In an instant, he struck the stalker behind the ear.
The man in the cap crumpled, unconscious.

Lumian hoisted him up and thoughtfully lowered his hat to cover his tightly shut eyes.
Then, as if aiding a drunken friend, he strode out of the alley and rounded the corner.
There stood an entrance to the underworld.
Lumian had "waited" for the stalker in the alley knowing he could slip underground if needed, and the setting was suitably "quiet."
...
When the man in the cap came to, his vision was swallowed by darkness. Only a faint light in the distance weakly revealed his surroundings.
Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! The sound pierced his ears, approaching and receding through layers of obstacles.
As a native of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he was no stranger to such a scene. He suspected he'd been taken underground. A steam subway passed through the "street" next door, providing the faint light.
Lumian sat in the shadows, eyeing the man in the cap. He grinned and said, "You have two choices now. Either tell me who sent you to follow me, or I'll take you deeper underground and bury you there. You should know that many people go missing in Trier every day. You won't be the only one."
Seeing the stalker's silence, Lumian knew his mental defenses were wavering. He added, "As for me, I'll navigate these underground streets and move to another district."
Realizing Lumian had an escape plan and was ready to silence him forever, the man in the cap's fear overwhelmed him. He blurted,
"I-it's Baron Brignais!"
Baron Brignais? The boss of the Savoie Mob and a creditor of Osta Trul? *Why is he tracking me?* I met him at the apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches last night and didn't even speak to him...
Lumian was baffled and at a loss.
This convinced him the man in the cap wasn't lying. If he wanted to fabricate a story, he wouldn't have chosen a mastermind that Lumian couldn't fathom.
Lumian frowned, asking, "Why is he following me?"
"I don't know," the man in the cap replied, trembling. "He just wants me to follow you and see where you'll go."
Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, "Where is Baron Brignais now?"
"If there's nothing else, he's usually at the Salle de Bal Brise on Avenue du Marché." The man in the cap strained to read Lumian's expression, but the light was too dim.

Salle de Bal Brise? Lumian recalled the landmark buildings in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman from his recent recon.
Avenue du Marché was the main road connecting Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman to the Suhit steam locomotive station, stretching two kilometers. Salle de Bal Brise was near the market district, its unique statue at the entrance unforgettable.
Lumian's lips curled into a smile as he told the stalker, "Take me there. I want to talk to Baron Brignais."
The man in the cap sighed in relief, feeling as if his life had been spared.
Who would hold the upper hand or be "accidentally" killed at Salle de Bal Brise was no longer his concern.
...
Salle de Bal Brise occupied the bottom two floors of a khaki-colored building. The second floor housed a café, while the first was a bustling dance hall—though it had just opened and few customers were present.
A white, spherical statue composed of countless skulls greeted visitors at the entrance. Inscribed in Intis were the words: "They sleep here, waiting for the arrival of happiness and hope[1]."
Lumian surveyed the scene and trailed his 'guide' around the statue to the dance hall entrance.
Two burly men in white shirts and black coats stood guard. They simultaneously rested their right hands on their waists and questioned the man in the cap, "Maxime, who is he?"
"H-he's here to see Baron Brignais," Maxime stammered.
Under the guards' suspicious scrutiny, Lumian replied coolly, "It's up to Baron Brignais to decide if he wants to see me or not, not you. Do you want to bear his wrath?"
After a moment's hesitation, one of the guards turned and entered the dance hall.
As they waited, Lumian casually asked Maxime, "What's up with the statue and the inscription? They don't match the dance hall at all."
Of course, it was cool.
Maxime nervously glanced at the grinning Lumian and explained, "This was originally an annex to the cathedral. Later, the bones were moved to the catacombs, leaving the area empty. Then, this building was constructed.
"Although those bones were purified or just ashes, the Savoie Mob found it too creepy after buying this place. We had no choice but to commission a statue symbolizing death and an inscription representing the dead to appease any lingering bones that might remain underground and unexcavated."

Lumian found the idea of people dancing here amusing, considering it could disturb the skeletons below, essentially dancing on their heads.
Just then, the guard returned and informed Lumian, "Baron Brignais will meet you at the café on the second floor."
"Alright." Lumian held his head high and strutted into the Salle de Bal Brise.
First, he noticed the dance floor encircled by railings and the half-height wooden stage up ahead for singers. Then, his attention was drawn to the haphazard seating and the various perfumes and cosmetics wafting through the air.
Maxime hesitated before following Lumian.
He felt compelled to report the situation to the baron, lest he end up missing in the underworld.
Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian recognized the gentleman he had encountered the night before.
In his thirties, the man sported a black, thin-tweed formal suit. His brown hair appeared naturally curly, and his brown eyes held a confident smile. His features were sharply defined.
Baron Brignais set down his coffee and grasped the mahogany pipe with his diamond-adorned palm.
"What would you like to drink?"
He was surprisingly polite and generous.
Eyeing the four thugs with their hands on their waists, Lumian addressed Baron Brignais, "Why did you send someone to follow me?"
Baron Brignais smiled and admitted candidly, "I saw you at Rue des Blouses Blanches last night and again near Rue Anarchie today. The more I observed you, the more familiar you seemed, so I had Maxime follow you to confirm your intentions in the market district.
"You were searching for Osta last night too, weren't you?"
"He tried to scam me out of my money," Lumian replied before inquiring, "Why do I seem familiar to you?"
Baron Brignais took a puff from his pipe and grinned.
"To experienced individuals like us, your actions can hardly be considered a disguise.
"Once we grow suspicious and connect the dots, we'll naturally recognize you—Lumian Lee, a wanted criminal with a 3,000 verl d'or bounty."
My bounty is only 3,000 verl d'or? Lumian's initial reaction was confusion.
As the source of Cordu's time loop, how could his official bounty be lower than that of the padre and Madame Pualis?

"However, merely providing information about you is worth 500 verl d'or," Baron Brignais added with a smile. "Young man, you need a book called Men's Aesthetics. Don't be embarrassed. In Trier, it's quite normal for men to wear makeup. It'll help you conceal your true identity."
This "gentleman" had also applied eyeliner and powder.
Lumian smirked.
"Are you planning to capture me for the bounty?"

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1. This quote is from an inscription on the entrance of the Salle de Bal Brise in Paris during the Victorian era. I made some modifications to the original inscription. The ballroom was indeed built on the site of an old cemetery, and even used the stones left behind after the cemetery was relocated. It's like dancing on graves. The previous mention of walking turtles also refers to events that really happened during that time. ↩

Chapter 122: Each With Their Own Plans

Baron Brignais didn't immediately respond to Lumian's question. Setting down his mahogany-colored pipe, he calmly took a sip of coffee.

After a moment, he smiled and said, "I'm not an official. I have no obligation to help them capture wanted criminals.

"Turning over anyone who's wanted would cost my Savoie Mob a great deal of valuable talent.

"More importantly, your bounty isn't impressive. It's far from tempting me. However, if you cause any trouble in the market district, I won't hesitate to tie you up and hand you over to the police for a considerable bounty."

The unspoken message from Baron Brignais was clear: There were many wanted criminals in the Savoie Mob. As long as you behaved, he could turn a blind eye.

Lumian understood. "You had someone tail me to confirm my intentions?"

Baron Brignais nodded approvingly.

"I'm glad you comprehend."

Lumian scanned the faces of the thugs, then calmly stated, "You've seen my wanted poster, so you've seen the others.

"My sole purpose in Trier is to find them."

"Excellent." Baron Brignais recognized that Lumian had no intention of crossing the Savoie Mob.

He gestured to the chair opposite the booth.

"Care for a cup of coffee?"

"No need." Lumian declined the offer. "I just want to locate those people as soon as possible."

He spread his arms wide and proclaimed, "Praise the Sun for allowing us to live in the light!"

With that, Lumian turned and strode toward the stairs, unconcerned about the hidden guns of the thugs.

Once his footsteps vanished down the staircase, Baron Brignais turned to the reserved Maxime and said gently,

"Tell me exactly how you were discovered and coerced by him. Spare no detail."

With the mahogany-colored pipe back in his mouth, Baron Brignais leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Trembling, Maxime recounted his ordeal from start to finish.

After hearing the account, one of the thugs asked indignantly, "Baron, why didn't you teach that punk a lesson? Why let him walk away so easily?"

Baron Brignais tapped the mahogany pipe on the table twice and

inquired with a smile, "Teach him a lesson? Do you know his Sequence, his abilities, or his weapons?"
"I don't," the thug admitted.
Baron Brignais rose, gripping the mahogany-colored pipe and smashing it against the thug's head.
Blood flowed from the gash in the thug's forehead, but he didn't dare to cry out or dodge. He stood there, terror etched on his face.
Baron Brignais withdrew the pipe and regarded him coldly.
"You dare challenge him without knowing anything? Go ahead, take my place. Let's see how long you'll survive!"
Ignoring the thug's response, Baron Brignais smiled again.
As he wiped his pipe with a folded white handkerchief from his chest pocket, he casually remarked, "Didn't you notice something off about Lumian Lee's wanted poster?
"The difference between the bounties for capturing him and providing information is too small. One is a mere 3,000 verl d'or, the other 500.
"What does that mean? It means the authorities don't want us handling Lumian Lee directly. They want us to provide intel so they can act themselves.
"Two possible reasons come to mind. First, Lumian Lee is incredibly dangerous. Allowing bounty hunters to pursue him would cause widespread casualties and unnecessary losses. Second, he possesses something valuable that officials don't want to end up in the hands of the bounty hunters.
"If I had just taught Lumian Lee a lesson, the second scenario would've been fine. But if it's the first possibility, what do you think our chances of survival are?"
The thug nodded repeatedly, not daring to argue.
Baron Brignais sat back down, picked up his coffee cup, and continued, "Moreover, based on how he dealt with Maxime and his audacity to approach me directly, I can tell that he's ruthless, decisive, and utterly confident in his abilities.
"I wager that if I had threatened him, demanding his total submission, he would have attacked without hesitation. He's the type who won't hesitate to kill.
"Heh, this is both his strength and his weakness. Unaware of my capabilities or the number of traps laid here, he still dares to confront me with the intention of killing me to ensure my silence. Sooner or later, he'll pay the price."
Baron Brignais sipped his coffee and closed his eyes.
"Let's wait and see if we should offer him assistance and protection. This ruthless country boy with a warrant on his head could prove to be a very useful weapon."

...
Outside the Salle de Bal Brise.
Lumian glanced back at the white spherical statue made of skulls and headed toward the nearest public carriage station.
On his way here, he had already devised a plan to deal with them, but ultimately didn't execute it.
He had expected that if Baron Brignais threatened him with the wanted poster or showed any hostility, he would feign fear and reveal that he was wanted for stealing a powerful Beyonder weapon from Cordu's ruins. He'd offer to hand it over in exchange for protection.
If Baron Brignais was strong and confident, and allowed Lumian to approach with the weapon, Lumian would launch a fake assassination attempt, a ruse to actually hand over the Fallen Mercury to the other party.
In that case, the unsuspecting Baron Brignais would become the evil dirk's puppet due to his gloveless hand. Having interacted with and occasionally "communicated" with Fallen Mercury for some time, Lumian had earned a degree of control over it. As long as it didn't conflict with its instinct to find a knife wielder, it would follow Lumian's orders, even when in someone else's hands.
Eventually, Baron Brignais would abandon his animosity and become an ally. After a few days, when no one suspected Lumian, the baron would mysteriously vanish into the depths of Underground Trier with a handful of his subordinates who knew about the matter, never to be seen again.
If Baron Brignais didn't allow Lumian to approach with Fallen Mercury and instead sent one of his thugs to retrieve the pewter-black dirk, Lumian's strategy would be to first transform the thug into the wielder. Then, he would use cunning to hide the abnormality and give Fallen Mercury the corresponding instructions.
In the future, if he made the puppet attack Baron Brignais, the baron would inherit the fate of being the wielder.
After completing this task, Lumian would escape if possible or surrender and wait for the fate exchange to finish. Even if the puppet died due to exhaustion, as long as Fallen Mercury wasn't severely damaged, the fate exchange wouldn't stop.
As for the torture he might endure after surrendering, Lumian didn't mind. As long as he wasn't dead, he would fully recover by six the next morning.
Regarding the possibility of Baron Brignais becoming a wielder and turning into a zombie with evident signs of decay, Lumian had a solution.

Baron Brignais himself had mentioned that men wearing makeup in Trier was common, and he was likely an avid reader of Men's Aesthetics.
Cologne could mask the stench of decay, and cosmetics could conceal rotting skin!
Truth be told, Lumian had struggled with whether to act in the café on the second floor of the Salle de Bal Brise.
Ultimately, he decided against it because Baron Brignais had shown a degree of kindness to a wanted criminal like him.
Such kindness from a villain often meant they wanted to exploit him.
If Baron Brignais truly wants to use me, he'll definitely help me conceal my identity and inform me of any unusual movements from bounty hunters in advance... As Lumian thought, he smiled.
This was a good thing!
As for the risk of ending up in a dangerous situation due to being used, Lumian already had a plan.
By then, he should be well-acquainted with Baron Brignais.
Familiarity made striking easier!
Lumian had only one option when being used for dangerous and unthinkable tasks: kill Baron Brignais.
Phew... Lumian exhaled and considered how to better disguise himself.
Initially, he had been confident in his disguise. As long as he didn't "reveal" his connection to the padre and Madame Pualis like he had with Anthony Reid, he wouldn't be recognized.
However, the incident with Baron Brignais made him realize that he had underestimated other Beyonders.
If there were Hunters adept at tracking, there might be other Sequences even better at recognizing people.
Baron Brignais or one of his subordinates must possess similar abilities... Lumian nodded imperceptibly.
This was confirmed by the fact that Osta had relocated several times.
With this realization, Lumian halted at the stop sign and boarded a brown double-decker carriage. He paid 30 coppets to secure a spot inside the carriage. Had he chosen a seat on the roof, it would have cost him only 15 coppets.
The carriage gradually moved toward Quartier de l'Observatoire.
Lumian gazed out the window, taking in the sight of hurried passersby dressed in various attire. He observed ringing bicycles, rental carriages from different companies, and humanoid machines composed of gears, valves, pipes, and levers. The metal backpack on its back spewed white steam, propelling it forward

step by step.
"Praise the Sun!"
The blazing sun beat down on the pedestrians, their arms outstretched in the street.
Clang! Clang! Clang! The nearby cathedral bell chimed. It was noon.

Chapter 123: Organizer

Lumian initially planned to scope out Mason Café before noon to ensure he'd know where to escape after his treatment the following day. However, the incident with Baron Brignais had significantly delayed him. He had no choice but to find Osta Trier first and visit the Quartier du Jardin Botanique later in the afternoon.

Osta was in his usual spot, by the entrance to the catacombs, a bonfire flickering against a stone pillar.

The sound of footsteps approaching caught Osta's attention, and he looked up from under his black hooded robe.

Expecting to make a quick buck, he instead froze in place.

Quickly recovering, he stood up and forced a smile. Before Lumian could speak, Osta preempted him, saying, "I contacted the organizer this morning, told him I have a friend who's into mysticism and wants to attend the gathering. He hasn't replied yet."

Lumian nodded, not questioning how Osta had reached out to the organizer. He walked over to the bonfire, found a rock, and sat down. Casually, he asked,

"You've duped plenty of people, but you're always in the same spot. Aren't you scared they'll track you down?"

Osta laughed and replied, "Most of the time, it's not really deception. As a true Beyonder and Secrets Suppliant, using my spirituality to perform divination for them isn't a scam.

"My predictions are far more accurate than most in the mysticism club!

"Sometimes, different folks need different strokes. If I'm ever exposed, I can always talk my way out."

"How?" Lumian inquired with a smile.

Osta coughed.

"The key is to not be too clear or absolute from the start. That way, you can accuse them of misunderstanding your intentions."

Lumian's smile deepened.

"When it came to the Samaritan Women's Spring, you agreed too easily and made your promise too definite."

Osta's expression fell.

"Yeah, I was cornered by Baron Brignais. I just wanted the money right away.

"The right approach would've been to say I had a solution, but it was difficult to achieve. After you begged me repeatedly, I'd reluctantly accept your cash, warning I couldn't guarantee success..."

Evidently, Osta had pondered his mistakes the previous night, considering how to avoid risks if he had to start over. He grew more animated as he spoke, only stopping when he noticed Lumian's subtle grin.
How could he openly tell this dangerous man how to swindle him?
Osta awkwardly smiled and said, "But I doubt this would've fooled you either. You're the most cautious person I've ever met."
Lumian smiled and shook his head. "You really picked the wrong pathway."
Osta didn't dare to carry on. Instead, he asked, "I thought about it last night. I never mentioned gatherings when we talked. I just said I bought the potion's main ingredient. How'd you know it was a mysticism gathering?"
Lumian chuckled.
"It was just a gut feeling."
Internally, he criticized, Aren't there only two possibilities? Either a one-on-one deal or a gathering. There was at least a 50% chance of guessing right! It was just a casual comment. No harm done if I was wrong!
Osta stared at Lumian, increasingly fearful.
It was becoming harder to guess this dangerous man's Sequence. He appeared skilled in combat, possessed strong spirituality, and had an intuition bordering on precognition.
Lumian savored the warmth of the bonfire and offhandedly asked, "How did you get involved with the mysticism gathering?"
Osta's face took on a nostalgic expression.
"Everyone comes to Trier with hope. Painters dream of having their works chosen by the World's Artists Exhibition, but most fail. Every year, some succumb to madness or suicide.
"Poor authors living in cheap apartments hope to replicate the success of best-sellers like Aurore and Meniere, but they end up selling their stories to small newspapers. They're forced to bear scathing reviews like 'trite,' 'mediocre,' and 'cliché.' Many of them have even stooped to writing smut for underground booksellers, risking arrest by detectives.
"Over a decade ago, I came to Trier from Cécilis Province, eager to make a fortune. I lived in a leaky attic, climbed scaffolding, worked in factories, smuggled illegal books, and sold soda. I made some money, but with each passing year, I realized I'd never be rich. Owning a home and enjoying leisurely mornings before work were impossible dreams.
"Eventually, I discovered mysticism magazines like Psychic and Mysteries. Perhaps I still fantasized about gaining superpowers overnight and changing my fate, so I started attending gatherings

with fellow enthusiasts. Those magazines would publish the relevant information.
"Earlier this year, a friend from the group asked if I wanted to join a gathering with real Beyonder powers. I couldn't refuse. You know the rest."
Lumian listened without interrupting Osta's account.
When Osta finished, Lumian asked, "Is that friend the gathering's organizer?"
"No," Osta shook his head. "The organizer goes by 'Mr. K.' He always wears a massive hood, practically covering his entire face."
"Mr. K..." Lumian committed the codename to memory and pondered for a moment. "What abilities has he shown?"
Osta shook his head again.
"I've never seen any. But after becoming a Secrets Suppliant, I sensed I was facing shadows and deep darkness when meeting him. I think he's very powerful."
He seems powerful. I wonder who's stronger—him, the padre, or Madame Pualis... Lumian mused before asking curiously, "Did you sense anything special around me?"
Osta hesitated before admitting, "No, but your dangerous aura frightens me more than even Baron Brignais."
Lumian glanced at his left chest and smiled.
"That's good."
Osta was taken aback, not understanding Lumian's meaning.
Lumian changed the subject.
"Have you heard of the Montsouris ghost?"
"Of course." As a con artist posing as a warlock, Osta knew many stories about Underground Trier. "Legend has it that an evil spirit lurks in this dark, vast underground. It always travels alone, never seeming to reach its destination. Those who encounter the ghost either die instantly or suffer mysterious deaths along with their families within the year.
"Those who've claimed to see the Montsouris ghost went mad and died within a year. I've heard both Church factions sent experts to search for the spirit, but they found nothing."
It sounds plausible... Lumian didn't inquire further. Standing, he told Osta,
"I'll catch up with you tomorrow night or the following morning."
"Alright." Though Osta didn't believe Lumian would harm him now, he couldn't help but sigh with relief at the departure of the dangerous man.
No ordinary human could feel at ease around a tiger!
On his way back to the surface, Lumian carried the carbide lamp and passed by the entrance to the catacombs. Once again, he saw

the arch adorned with white bones, sunflowers, and steam symbols.
Looking at the words "Stop! The Death Empire lies ahead!" Lumian cautiously approached the natural doorway separating the inner and outer chambers.
Suddenly, a figure emerged from behind the stone arch and bellowed, "Halt!"
The figure donned a blue vest and yellow pants. He was an elderly man with gray hair and wrinkled skin.
His light-yellow eyes, slightly clouded, locked onto Lumian.
"Can't I go in?" Lumian feigned the innocence of a foreigner.
The old man scrutinized him. "You need to purchase a ticket upstairs and bring a white candle with you."
"I have a friend buried inside. Do I need to buy a ticket to pay my respects?" Lumian fabricated a friend on the spot.
The old man eyed him suspiciously, "Don't tell me you're one of those Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative college students? Those troublemakers always concoct lies to sneak into the tomb. They sing, dance, and feast in the ossuary! Fine, go in. Just remember to bring lit white candles like them. That's my only demand!"
Lumian once worried that if he attended university, he'd be too different from his classmates. Now, it seemed his concerns were unfounded.
Those students were even wilder than he was!
"Alright," Lumian feigned disappointment. "I'll bring a white candle next time."
The old man nodded, relieved.
Lumian turned and followed the restored path to the stairs leading to the surface.
Over a hundred meters away, he suddenly spotted a black shadow from the corner of his eye.
The shadow hunched slightly, shuffling behind a row of stone pillars on the left.
Lumian glanced over and noticed its intangibility, as if it were almost illusory.
Instinctively, he raised the carbide lamp, casting a bluish-yellow glow.
The shadow disappeared, as though it had never existed.
Lumian quickly scanned the surroundings but found nothing.
Is it an illusion or an underground ghost? As Lumian pondered, he suddenly wondered: *Could it be the Montsouris ghost?* Did I encounter the Montsouris ghost?
His pupils widened, and his expression grew unusually grave.

Moments later, Lumian erupted into laughter, nearly doubling over. He laughed until tears threatened to spill from his eyes.
"Haha, come on, come at me! I want to see how you'll kill my entire family and how you'll cause my mysterious death!"

Chapter 124: Method of Self-Protection

As planned, Lumian circled the vicinity of Mason Café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique before making his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré on Rue Anarchie. He headed straight for the third floor and arrived at Room 310, where the lunatic resided.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He hammered on the door.

"I'm dying! I'm dying!" The wailing from inside grew frantic.

"I'm f*cking dying too!" Lumian spat, his face expressionless.

Startled by his response, the lunatic fell silent and offered no reply.

Lumian didn't knock again. He produced a small wire he carried with him, inserted it into the keyhole, and fidgeted with it.

With a click, the grimy brown wooden door swung open.

Inside, Lumian found the madman, clad in a linen shirt and yellow pants, kneeling with his thick black beard nearly covering his eyes.

Lumian entered and casually closed the door. He crouched before the lunatic and lowered his voice.

"I've encountered the Montsouris ghost too."

The lunatic visibly trembled, his fear-filled blue eyes showing the faintest glimmer of lucidity.

After a few seconds, he caught his breath and asked in a deep voice, "Are you sure it was the Montsouris ghost?"

He's in that state of intermittent lucidity Charlie mentioned? Lumian smirked and replied, "I don't know. That's why I'm asking you to confirm it.

"What did the Montsouris ghost you saw look like?"

With a shiver, the lunatic described, "A black shadow, like a lonely old man. Its back was slightly hunched, and it moved very slowly.

"After I spotted it, it vanished into the darkness. I didn't realize it was the Montsouris ghost until my parents, my wife, and my children started dying one after another..."

It's eerily similar to my experience... Lumian frowned, suspecting that he had indeed encountered the Montsouris ghost.

He contemplated for a moment.

"How did your family die? Were you attacked?"

The lunatic hastily shook his head.

"I—I often felt something watching me from the shadows. But I didn't face anything else. Otherwise, I wouldn't have made it this far.

"My child became gravely ill and died in the hospital. We had just cleansed and interred him in the catacombs when my wife—my wife, snapped and hanged herself in our room.

"That's when I recalled the legend of the Montsouris ghost. I took

my parents to the cathedral and asked the padre there to protect us.
"The Church took it very seriously and assigned three clergymen to stay at my home. Nothing happened during that time. I thought the nightmare was over.
"But after the New Year, the clergymen left. Soon after, my father strangled my mother and ended his own life with a table knife. I can't remember much after that. Sometimes, I wake up and realize that I moved here at some point..."
The lunatic's blue eyes revealed unmasked anguish. Lumian felt like a tightly wound spring, ready to snap at any moment.
"They said the Montsouris ghost would kill anyone who encountered it back then. But this lasted until the New Year." Lumian keenly noticed the lunatic's account differed from the legend.
The lunatic shook his head.
"I don't know why it happened. I thought the nightmare was over. Otherwise, the three clergymen wouldn't have left..."
A curse with no time limit until all targets are dead? Lumian formed a new hypothesis about the Montsouris ghost legend.
He stood up and told the lunatic, "I might have encountered the Montsouris ghost too. Let's see which one of us lasts longer. If I figure out how to break this curse, you can pay me to help you."
"A way, a solution..." The corners of the lunatic's mouth twitched as he echoed Lumian's words, caught between tears and laughter.
He raised his hands and clutched his hair.
"I'm dying, I'm dying!"
Lumian intended to ask the lunatic's name, something to inscribe when he was laid to rest in the cemetery or catacombs, but he shook his head, opened the door, and left Room 310 instead.
Back in Room 207, Lumian sat on the bed, mulling over how to break the curse brought by the Montsouris ghost.
Although theoretically, the curse might not take effect until year's end, leaving no urgency for now, Lumian couldn't rely on the Montsouris ghost's apparent delay.
Moreover, he had no immediate family, so he stood a high chance of being the curse's first victim. It could happen in the latter half of the year, next week, or even tonight.
Come to think of it, that man might still be alive. If the Montsouris ghost could help me kill him, I'd owe it a debt of gratitude... Lumian's thoughts raced, and he suddenly laughed at himself.
In the dream, he had lied to Ryan and the others, claiming he'd forgotten his original name. He simply wanted to avoid mentioning or remembering it.

When he was young, his family had been well-off, but the man he called father turned out to be a philanderer and later a gambling addict.
His mother died from grief-induced illness, and his grandfather went bankrupt. They lived together in the slums until his grandfather's death a few years later.
Thus, after being adopted by Aurore, Lumian had willingly asked to take her last name and change his own.
Lumian didn't know if the man who had only provided genetic material was dead or alive. If he was dead, it was a blessing. If not, he hoped the Montsouris ghost would step up its game.
As for himself, Lumian dared not assume the Montsouris ghost wouldn't harm him just because he harbored the taint of an evil god and the mark of a great existence.
As long as it didn't possess him, the ghost could do anything!
According to Madam Magician, Lumian was convinced that many Beyonders and monsters could easily kill him, but they would have to face the ensuing corruption as a consequence.
I'm not certain if this is a curse or not... But I can't just sit here waiting for death. I have to take action... Aurore used to say that the best skill for the weak or underage is 'finding their parents'...
With this in mind, Lumian's eyes brightened. He stood up and walked to the table to find a pen and paper.
He planned to update Madam Magician on the mission's progress. Simultaneously, he would mention his encounter with the Montsouris ghost, questioning if he had been cursed and how to address the issue.
Though the woman with the Magician code name wasn't his parent, she was undoubtedly his superior in the current circumstances. It was logical to seek assistance from his superior when in trouble!
Lumian pondered for a moment before writing:
"Esteemed Madam Magician,
"I have followed your instructions and gained Osta Trul's trust. I've also requested his introduction to Mr. K's mysticism gathering...
"On my return from the catacombs, I regrettably encountered the legendary Montsouris ghost. Of course, I cannot be certain.
"The specific legend is as such...
"I seek to know if I have been cursed by the Montsouris ghost or if another influence is at play. How should I proceed?"
Towards the end, Lumian intentionally added the code name "Seven of Wands" to remind the recipient not to overlook his status as an external member of their enigmatic organization.
Lumian deduced this from the lady's use of the tarot cards'

Magician code name and his Seven of Wands.
He suspected Madam Magician might belong to a clandestine organization symbolized by tarot cards and devoted to a powerful entity. The Major Arcana were official members, each possessing formidable abilities. The Minor Arcana served as peripheral members who undertook various missions.
After folding the letter, Lumian meticulously cleaned the room. He crushed a few bedbugs that had crept in from next door and disposed of them in the bathroom trash can.
Once done, he lit the candle and conjured a spiritual barrier to summon Madam Magician's messenger in his name.
Before long, the candle flame transformed into a deep blue hue.
This time, an arm-height, doll-like messenger in a light-gold dress materialized atop the flames, floating there.
Its unfocused, light-blue eyes scanned the surroundings before gently nodding.
"Much better than last time."
The voice was otherworldly and ghostly, far from human-like.
"Truth be told, I'm not fond of those bedbugs either," Lumian chimed in.
The doll messenger smiled.
"Right? No creature appreciates those pests!"
Lumian sensed a shared sentiment, as if both sides despised the same thing.
With that, the doll messenger extended a pale-white palm, devoid of any skin texture, and the letter floated up.
Lumian watched the "doll" seize the letter and vanish like a bursting bubble.
He sighed with admiration and thought, Having a messenger is so convenient...
After concluding the ritual and tidying up the wooden table, Lumian returned to the bed, awaiting the messenger's response.
As time passed, the night outside deepened. Songs echoed from the underground bar, but Lumian received no reply from Madam Magician.
This made him furrow his brow.
Does Madam Magician have other matters to handle and no time to read my letter?
I can't keep waiting. I must devise other ways to protect myself...
Neither Hunter nor Provoker grant me the power to combat curses —if it is indeed a curse...
Dancer doesn't either. Unless I genuinely pray to that concealed entity after the sacrificial dance. But how would that differ from suicide?

Ah, if I can't pray to that hidden being, I can seek out that great existence!
I bear His seal upon me. I even obtained His permission when I claimed the boon. I'm not afraid to beseech Him again!
Yes, I can entreat Him to help me lift this curse.
Lumian acted swiftly, setting up the altar.
Since Madam Magician hadn't specifically outlined the ingredients for the great existence's domain, Lumian believed that whatever he employed wouldn't impact the final outcome, as long as it didn't invoke other deities.
He arranged orange candles made of citrus and lavender. Two symbolized the deity, and one represented himself.
After completing the preparations, Lumian stepped back and examined the three yellowish candles. He recited in Hermes, "The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck..."

Chapter 125: Struggle

As Lumian intoned the three lines of the honorific name, a faint gray fog materialized around him, radiating an unnerving aura.
The orange candle flame adopted a bluish tinge, casting a sinister, deep glow over the entire altar.
In that instant, Lumian's thoughts seemed to decelerate. He felt an itching beneath his flesh, as if something was on the verge of burrowing out.
A distant, inscrutable gaze from an unfathomable height appeared once more.
Collecting himself, Lumian resumed his prayer.
Adhering to Madam Magician's instructions and incorporating sacrificial knowledge from Aurore's grimoire, he recited in Hermes, "I implore you. I beseech you to lift this curse from me..."
In all honesty, Lumian yearned to request the great existence's protection for a year, shielding him from all harm. But that was clearly unattainable. He had not yet mastered the necessary Hermes phrases to counter the threat of the Montsouris ghost. Thus, he could only allude to the curse plaguing him.
As the ritual culminated, Lumian began to draw upon the power of the herbs on the altar.
In the following moment, his vision blurred, as if a seraph with twelve pairs of luminous wings materialized before him.
Descending from above, the seraph extended its arms, enveloping Lumian in an embrace.
The wings of light closed around him, enfolding him layer by layer.
Lumian shook off his stupor and noticed the bluish candle flame had reverted to its original orange hue at some unknown point.
Recalling the surreal encounter, it felt like a dream. He couldn't help but murmur to himself, Did I just see an angel? Did that great existence send one of His angels to protect me and lift this curse?
Until today, Lumian had only heard of angels in the sermons of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. He never anticipated experiencing an angelic embrace firsthand.
According to Madam Magician, this was at least a high-level Sequence 2 entity. Even if only a fraction of its power had been projected from afar, it was still angelic in nature... Lumian felt an even deeper reverence for the enigmatic organization that employed tarot cards as their moniker and the great existence that had sealed the corruption within him.
Simultaneously, he breathed a sigh of relief.
If the Montsouris ghost had truly inflicted a curse, it should no

longer be an issue. How could a ghost that dared not confront the protection granted by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's clergy and was confined to wandering beneath Trier compare to an angel?
Nevertheless, trepidation still gripped Lumian's heart. He had prayed for the curse to be lifted. What if the Montsouris ghost employed a different method of killing than a curse?
He waited until midnight, but Magician's response never came.
Unable to risk sleep, he lay on the bed, shutting his eyes just to rest.
Staying awake all night posed no challenge for him. At six in the morning, his body and mind would simultaneously reset.
This was both a curse and a blessing.
It wasn't until the latter half of the night that the cacophony of Rue Anarchie died down. Lumian discerned the faint chirping of insects in the distance and an even more remote whistle.
Abruptly, his body felt leaden, and breathing grew labored. It was as if someone had swaddled him in a blanket and weighed him down.
This isn't good! Lumian tried to rise, but he could only move his arms.
His eyes wouldn't even open!
His arms felt restrained, barely able to lift a few centimeters off the bed.
In the next moment, Lumian's body turned frigid, and his nose felt damp. It was as if he had been stuffed into a sack and hurled into the depths of a river.
His breathing faltered, his chest tightened with pain, and his thoughts decelerated.
Lumian's desperate attempts at resistance flashed through his mind—entering Cogitation and activating the black thorn symbol on his chest.
He dismissed the idea in an instant.
Firstly, he would likely lose control. Secondly, the Montsouris ghost bore no connection to the covert entity known as Inevitability. It might not be deterred by the black thorn symbol.
Unless left with no alternative and teetering on the brink of death, Lumian wouldn't gamble his life on this seemingly futile method.
His lips and nose turned icy, as though an invisible hand was pressing them down.
Paired with the sensation of drowning, Lumian found breathing impossible. His lungs were on the verge of bursting.
Words like Hunter, Provoker, Dancer, corruption, seal, and Fallen Mercury flickered through Lumian's mind, each forming fleeting thoughts before dissipating.

Fallen Mercury... Fallen Mercury! At last, Lumian had a revelation.
He strained to shift his gloved left palm to the side.
He had already positioned the evil dirk in the most accessible location to handle potential emergencies.
A few seconds later, Lumian, gasping for air with his mouth agape, made contact with the hilt of Fallen Mercury and hoisted the pewter-black dirk.
Fallen Mercury was no longer shrouded in black cloth. The intricate patterns on its surface overlapped, inducing vertigo.
With every ounce of his strength, Lumian hoisted his shoulder, bent his arm, and plunged Fallen Mercury above his body.
There was nothing there. Not even a scratch, let alone blood!
Without hesitation, Lumian gritted his teeth and angled his arm toward his body.
With a sickening pop, he drove Fallen Mercury into his left waist.
Crimson blood oozed out, staining the blade of Fallen Mercury. The phantom mercury droplet symbolizing the fate of immolation penetrated Lumian's body.
The pain shocked Lumian's oxygen-starved mind to consciousness.
His vision blurred as the enigmatic river, composed of innumerable mercury symbols, emerged.
This represented his own fate.
Ignoring the need for precision, Lumian cast his gaze downstream of the illusory river, toward a current on the verge of engulfing the other tributaries.
He then infused his spirituality into Fallen Mercury, allowing it to agitate the complex mercury symbol birthed from the river's entanglement.
In the next moment, Lumian saw himself lying on the bed, his face a purplish hue, teetering on the brink of death.
The mercury symbols abruptly constricted, solidifying into a droplet that seeped into Fallen Mercury's blade.
Almost instantaneously, Lumian felt his entire body relax. The sensations of drowning and suffocation vanished. Simultaneously, pain enveloped him, and he couldn't help but emit a soft groan.
Flames erupted from his body, searing his flesh inch by inch.
He had utilized the pain of being incinerated stored in Fallen Mercury to trade for his fate of being assaulted by a Montsouris ghost. He had successfully escaped a state where he couldn't even struggle, and the attack didn't come again!
Fallen Mercury could stab others or Lumian himself, replacing an unwanted fate!
He was ignited, reliving the agony of battling the flaming beast.
Braced for the onslaught, Lumian rolled beneath the bed.

Thumping against the floor, he rolled back and forth to smother the flames engulfing him.
After a while, it was unclear whether Lumian's strategy had worked, if the fire brought on by the fate exchange had run its course, or if it was a combination of both, but he was no longer consumed by the scarlet inferno.
However, his clothes were in shreds, and his body was marred with charred wounds. His nose teetered on the edge of detachment, and his singed hair emitted a burnt odor.
For an ordinary person or most Low-Sequence Beyonders, this was an injury beyond resuscitation—death was the only outcome.
Lumian strained to keep his eyes open and focused, fighting the urge to pass out.
As time ticked away, he sensed his life rapidly ebbing.
He clung to consciousness, gasping for air.
After an indeterminate period, Lumian finally heard the eerily beautiful chime of a bell.
Clang! Clang! Clang!
The bell struck six in the morning, Trier time, its peal echoing through Rue Anarchie and beyond. Dawn's first light crept over the horizon.
Lumian snapped to attention, his pain abruptly gone.
His body and mind had completely reset!
Phew... Lumian exhaled in relief and stood. He looked down at the tattered remnants of his once crisp linen shirt and dark pants. His skin had returned to normal.
Already in a financial bind, he couldn't help but sigh.
He needed new clothes—a fresh expense!
Still, he'd managed to survive the Montsouris ghost's initial attack. This was likely a first in the annals of its dark legend.
From the looks of it, it's not a curse... Lumian changed into fresh clothes and stepped into the washroom to splash cold tap water on his face.
Gazing into the mirror, he noticed that some of his hair had shortened, and the golden dye had faded in places.
These external changes couldn't be reset.
After washing up, Lumian returned to Room 207 and was startled to find another letter awaiting him.
The folded piece of paper lay innocuously on the wooden table.
Lumian muttered under his breath, Isn't it too early for a reply? You didn't sleep again last night. Did you just get home?
With a shake of his head, Lumian picked up the Magician's response and unfolded it.
The handwriting was messy, but he could just make out that it

belonged to a woman.
"Excellent work. Engage more with Mr. K and exhibit your wild, fanatical side until he converts you and extends an invitation to his organization.
"The Montsouris ghost is not a curse. There are three solutions for your current predicament:
"First, die before it. Use the corruption within you to destroy it and avenge the fallen.
"Second, trade your fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost with your dirk. Haven't you ever considered using that blade on yourself?
"Third, take refuge in a particular cathedral of a certain Church and never leave its sanctuary."

Chapter 126: Finding Prey

Lumian quickly scanned Madam Magician's message, committing the essential points to memory.

It was evident that the first and third solutions to the Montsouris ghost dilemma were jokes. The only viable option was the second: using Fallen Mercury to swap his fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost.

In all honesty, Lumian hadn't considered stabbing himself with Fallen Mercury to proactively change his destiny. Only when he was cornered by the Montsouris ghost, teetering on the brink of death, did this desperate strategy surface in his mind.

Time was of the essence, and Lumian had to act fast. He'd only managed to exchange his fate of being attacked by the Montsouris ghost, not completely avoiding one. He'd narrowly escaped the first crisis but still lingered in death's shadow.

Given the choice, Lumian would have still opted to exchange the fate of being attacked by the Montsouris ghost instead of just encountering one. The attack had already occurred, and he couldn't be sure it would cease with a mere fate swap. He needed the most reliable plan to save himself.

In simpler terms, what if the Montsouris ghost killed him and realized it had never met him and targeted the wrong person?

I need to find someone to trade the fate stored in Fallen Mercury for a better one. Then, I'll prepare thoroughly, and when I'm ready, I'll stab myself to complete the exchange. I'll seal the Montsouris ghost encounter inside Fallen Mercury... Lumian combined his experience with Madam Magician's advice and quickly devised a way to escape his predicament.

When the time came, Fallen Mercury, also known as the Cursed Blade, would cause whoever was stabbed to suffer the fate of their entire family dying, including themselves.

The drawback was the time it would take for the effect to occur.

Lumian drew Fallen Mercury from his waist, eyeing the blade wrapped in black cloth. He felt the Beyonder weapon's potential more acutely than ever.

He seriously contemplated finding experts to repair Fallen Mercury. Otherwise, the enchanted dirk would only last until year's end.

Maybe Mr. K's Beyonder Gathering could provide the resources he needed.

My suspicion is correct. Madam Magician's intention for me to meet Osta Trul is to use him to attend Mr. K's Gathering and join the secret organization behind it... Lumian donned a wide-

brimmed hat and a black shirt resembling formal attire before leaving Room 207 and descending the stairs.
As a Hunter, he needed to start his search for prey.
Upon exiting Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian spotted Charlie sitting on the three-story staircase leading to the street. Pale-faced, he gazed at the sky, melancholic, with a lit cigarette in his right hand.
"What's wrong?" Lumian asked, casually sitting beside Charlie.
Charlie didn't look back. He inhaled from his cigarette and sighed.
"I feel like I've lost my soul. It's gone."
He wore a white shirt, red vest, and a black suit jacket draped over his left arm—a hotel uniform.
Lumian grinned and got to the point.
"Did you sleep with that older woman?"
Charlie turned to Lumian and emphasized, "Please call her Madame. She's only in her fifties."
He took another drag and exhaled a smoke ring.
"Did you know? She gave me a diamond necklace worth at least 1,500 verl d'or. I couldn't resist. She was so dazzling and seductive that she went straight to my heart."
"It," Lumian corrected.
Charlie smiled sheepishly.
"Madame Alice is captivating too. It's quite a feat to maintain her elegance at her age. She mentioned she'll stay in Trier for six months and can offer me 500 verl d'or a month..."
As he spoke, Charlie's voice grew somber, and his eyes took on a melancholic hue.
Just as Lumian thought Charlie would sigh over his lost soul, a long exhale escaped him.
"Why can she only stay for half a year..."
Lumian patted Charlie's shoulder, saying earnestly, "Take care of yourself."
Charlie's eyelids twitched.
"There's a need for moderation. Madame Alice is far too enthusiastic. I was so exhausted last night that I didn't even have that beautiful dream."
Lumian chuckled and said, "You openly mentioned obtaining a diamond necklace worth 1,500 verl d'or. In Rue Anarchie, that's enough wealth to make many people go mad. Aren't you afraid I'll steal it?"
Charlie laughed.
"I had to share it with someone, or I'd feel awful.
"I've noticed you don't seem short on money. You're even quite generous. You wouldn't commit a crime for a mere 1,000 to 2,000 verl d'or."

Lumian grinned, retorting, "Is there a chance I'm pretending not to lack money to lure someone like you into lowering your guard?"
Charlie's expression froze as the dying cigarette nearly burned his fingers.
Lumian changed the subject, asking casually, "Is there anyone you despise so much that you think they deserve to die?"
Charlie snuffed out his cigarette on the stone steps, puzzled, "Why do you ask?"
He intended to pocket the extinguished cigarette butt but decided against it, tossing it aside instead.
A nearby vagrant darted over, grabbing the warm cigarette and taking a few drags.
Without waiting for Lumian's response, Charlie continued, "The person I despise most is our head attendant. You've no idea how detestable he is. Haha, I've never thought of wanting him dead, but I just wish I could hood his face and beat him up one day.
"I don't think many people truly deserve to die. One is Baron Brignais, the market district's Savoie Mob leader. He colludes with loan sharks, driving many to bankruptcy. A friend of mine jumped off a building in desperation. But what did that accomplish? His son vanished mysteriously, and his daughter was forced into the Salle de Bal Brise. Although she's supposed to only sing, in reality, well..."
"That's right. If he had the courage to kill himself, why didn't he think of a way to kill Baron Brignais and the others?" Lumian nodded slightly.
Charlie stared at Lumian, taken aback.
"Your thoughts are a little extreme."
He added, "The second person deserving death is Margot, leader of the Poison Spur Mob. He manipulates people into swindling women new to Trier. After bleeding them dry, he forces them into prostitution. That's how Miss Ethans in Room 8 on the fourth floor ended up in the motel. Most of the money she earns is taken by Margot. She's tried to escape several times, but she's been beaten within an inch of her life before she could leave Rue Anarchie."
Market district has quite a few mobs. No wonder it's chaotic at night... Lumian glanced at Charlie, saying, "It sounds like you sympathize with Miss Ethans."
Charlie puffed out his chest.
"True Intis gentlemen empathize with ladies in tragic situations and offer help when appropriate."
Lumian tersely acknowledged.
"Do you know where Margot lives?"
"I don't know." Charlie shook his head. "But he frequents the motel

in the evenings, extorting money from Miss Ethans. If you hear a woman crying, shouting, and cursing on the fourth floor, that's Margot and his thugs."
Lumian nodded pensively and inquired, "Who else do you think deserves to die?"
Charlie considered for a moment, replying with a contorted expression, "Monette, that Islander. He swindled me out of 10 verl d'or!
"Can you imagine? I'd been unemployed for some time and hadn't found a new job yet. That was my last bit of savings. I nearly starved to death because of him!"
"Where does he live?" Lumian asked nonchalantly.
"He was staying at the motel initially. But after scamming me, he moved out. I don't know where he went." Charlie's anger flared as he spoke. "I was waiting for him to hook me up with a job..."
Once he'd calmed down, Charlie eyed Lumian quizzically, "Why's your hair different?"
There were strands of varying lengths, gold mingled with black.
"Don't you think it's rather stylish?" Lumian asked earnestly.
Charlie snorted, his expression dubious.
His experience with the Idiot Instrument made him instinctively question Lumian's intentions in such matters.
After a few moments, Charlie glanced at the street vendors and waved his hand.
"I've got to head to the hotel. I'll see you tonight."
Lumian stayed put on the stone steps outside the hotel, waving at Charlie's retreating figure.
...
That afternoon, Lumian took a public carriage to Quartier du Jardin Botanique. After walking over 300 meters, he reached Mason Café.
The café occupied the ground floor of a beige four-story building near the botanical garden.
Green plants twined around the building's exterior. The ground-floor shops were set back nearly a meter, with pillars supporting an outer walkway for pedestrians.
Mason's Café boasted dark green walls and large windows. Sunlight streamed through the glass, illuminating the tables and chairs outside.
Lumian, dressed in a dark suit and wide-brimmed hat, entered the café.
The first thing he noticed were the intricate plant sculptures on the wall, interspersed with Intisian sentences:
"Who holds supreme power in the country? The president or

parliament?
"It's a café!
"Who has the final say in a legal case? The Supreme Court?
"It's a café!
"Who's the authority in literature? L'Institut de Intis or the Journal des débats?
"No, it's a café—always a café[1]!"

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1. Adapted from the opening chapter of "Histoire Insolite des Cafés Parisiens" which was used in an early 21st-century bibliography. The original text was too lengthy, so it has been condensed. ↩

Chapter 127: Café

Lumian couldn't help but smile when he saw the "slogan" on the wall.

It reminded him of something Aurore had once said: "In Trier, the café holds a unique status. It's the birthplace of riots, the sanctuary of conspiracies, and the wellspring of scandals."

Throughout Intisian history, innumerable riots had been sparked in cafés, and countless literary works and political struggles had brewed within them.

Unlike the neighboring Loen Kingdom, Intis had its own private clubs, but they were fairly exclusive or high-end, with limited access. Be they former nobles, current members of parliament, high-ranking government officials, financiers, bankers, industrialists, renowned authors, newspaper editors, military generals, or university professors, everyone enjoyed frequenting different cafés to engage in spirited conversations, presenting a more approachable side to the public. After all, the Republic's political slogan and image were built upon "freedom, equality, and fraternity."

Naturally, the cafés frequented by various social strata were vastly different, often distinguished by location, price, and style. So, when Lumian heard from Charlie that Laurent had used his mother, Mrs. Lakazan, to seek opportunities in upscale cafés, he wasn't surprised or puzzled. Many people did this, often becoming archetypes for novelists, but only a few succeeded.

At the same time, banquets and salons were all the rage in Trier. If any high society member didn't host a salon once a month, others would assume something had befallen their family or that a financial crisis had jeopardized their political future.

Aurore, who clearly adored this metropolis, stayed away partly because artists like authors, poets, painters, and sculptors seemed like tamed butterflies, fluttering about the salons of various politicians, financiers, and officials. It appeared that only by gaining their approval could the value of their work be realized.

The amalgamation of salons and cafés supplanted most club functions.

In this system, taverns, beer houses, dance halls, and cafés shared similarities, but the latter held far greater significance, leaning more towards the upper classes.

Upon seeing a customer enter, a female attendant in a grayish-white dress greeted him with a smile.

"Do you have a favorite seat, or are you meeting a friend?"

Lumian nodded.

"Cabin D."
The female attendant led him to a secluded corner.
Beside a window, he could see a lush, tree-filled botanical garden.
"What can I get you to drink?" The female attendant presented a brown-covered wine list.
Lumian opened it, momentarily taken aback by the dazzling array of choices.
Fermo Coffee, Highlander Coffee, Reem Espresso...
Sibe Black Tea, Marquis Black Tea, West Balam Black Tea...
Fruit Slushy, Frangipani Cocktail, Ambergris Lemonade, Venus Sacred Oil...
Summer Wine, Kirsch, Rose Dew, Walnut Spirit, Orange & Lemon Wine, Cherry Spirit...
Absinthe, Fennel Absinthe, Gin, Bitter Curaçao, Apple Brandy, Grape Dregs Brandy...
Sweetwine: Perfect Love, Barbarian Cream, Little Rose, West Pyro...
Considering he had a psychologist's appointment later, neither alcohol nor coffee seemed fitting. Lumian thought for a moment and said,
"Ambergris lemonade."
"Four licks," the female attendant inquired. "Do you need cake, bread, or other food?"
"Not for now. I'll decide when my friend arrives." Lumian surveyed the surroundings of Mason's Café and noted the absence of customers at this time.
The lunch crowd had cleared out by 2:30 p.m., leaving more than an hour before teatime.
Soon, the female attendant returned with a tray, placing a glass filled with a colorless liquid and a few lemons on the table.
Lumian eyed the empty seat across from him, picked up his cup, and took a sip.
A sweet, elegant fragrance filled his nostrils, and the refreshing sour taste invigorated him.
As the minutes passed, Lumian noticed the wall clock nearing 3:30 p.m. He couldn't help but glance at the café entrance.
Green plants adorned the area, but no customers entered.
Just as Lumian looked away in disappointment, a soft female voice sounded from the booth behind him.
"I'm already here. Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."
Lumian assumed the woman didn't want a face-to-face conversation, so he didn't turn around. He lowered his voice and asked politely, "Good afternoon. How should I address you? Can you hear my soft voice?"
"No problem," the gentle female voice replied. "You can call me

Susie."
"Hello, Madame Susie." For some reason, Lumian felt relatively calm facing this psychologist. His usual habit of inward commentary dissipated.
A familiar uneasiness washed over him a second later.
"What's wrong?" Susie, seated behind him, inquired gently.
Lumian pondered for two seconds and didn't conceal his feelings.
"I'm a little uneasy. It's an odd yet familiar sensation.
"Yes, I must have experienced something similar when I met an information broker yesterday."
Susie spoke rapidly, apologetically, "Sorry, I'm used to reading your thoughts. That might be causing your discomfort.
"Your body is infused with intense corruption and is in a delicate balance. The slightest disturbance triggers a reaction. In other words, you're highly sensitive to hidden and invisible influences, surpassing Beyonders of the same Sequence or higher."
"Is that so..." Lumian wasn't angry.
In his view, a psychologist needed to read thoughts for effective treatment. Rely on words alone?
He then furrowed his brow.
"Was Anthony Reid also reading my thoughts back then? I'm referring to the information broker."
"I know." Susie understood. "Where did Anthony Reid come from? What did he do before becoming an information broker?"
"He had a West Midseashire Coast accent, a retired soldier," Lumian recounted.
After a brief silence, Susie said, "If he's truly from West Midseashire Coast, it's indeed possible he's a Beyonder of the Spectator pathway."
The Spectator pathway... Lumian had read about it in Aurore's Warlock notebook, but she only knew that its corresponding Sequence 9 was called the Spectator. They possessed remarkable observational abilities, deciphering true thoughts from subtle expressions and body language.
So a Sequence above the Spectator pathway is a Psychologist... As this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he heard Susie correct him.
"It's Psychiatrist."
"That sounds more reassuring." Lumian smiled. "What Sequence is Anthony Reid?"
After learning the other's pathway, he felt Anthony Reid should have recognized him and sensed his anxiety, concern, and attempts at intimidation.
"According to your description, he's at least a Sequence 8," Susie concluded.

Lumian smirked. "If he's really a Psychiatrist, that's interesting. He didn't even treat the aftereffects of his battlefield trauma."
"It's not unusual. When a Psychiatrist suffers severe psychological trauma, it's incredibly difficult for them to recover alone. They often need the help of another Psychiatrist, and treating a Psychiatrist is far riskier than usual. One misstep can result in the infection of the patient's mental illness," Susie explained succinctly.
As the conversation shifted and the atmosphere lightened, Lumian gradually relaxed, no longer feeling uneasy or anxious.
He took the initiative to say,"Shall we begin the treatment?"
"Talking is part of the treatment." Susie's gentle voice hinted at a smile.
Realizing that the first stage of the treatment was simply conversation, Lumian eased further. He leaned back against the booth partition and asked, puzzled, "I know it was a dream, but there are many details I can't comprehend.
"Since it's my dream, how can I know the various abilities of the three official investigators? Why am I so familiar with the unique abilities of the padre, the shepherd, and company?"
Susie's tone was warm as she replied, "The three official investigators were forcibly drawn into your dream. It's as if their subconscious came close to yours, in a semi-open state.
"They would actively participate in the dream, revealing all sorts of information they know. Even if they only think about it, your subconscious can sense it."
In other words, with Ryan, Leah, and Valentine's involvement, certain parts of the dream are created through "interaction?" Their responses are a collective creation of my subconscious and theirs, adhering to unspoken rules? Lumian considered this as he pondered previously unresolved questions.
Susie's voice remained steady as she continued, "You must have some suspicions about why you know the abilities of the evil god's followers, right? But you're just unwilling to confront them?"
At this, Lumian's eyelids twitched involuntarily.
"Based on the information Madam Magician provided, most of Guillaume Bénet and Pierre Berry's abilities stem from the evil god's Sequence, Contractee. So, it's impossible to predict their abilities beforehand. It depends on which creature they've signed a contract with," Susie gently analyzed. "In other words, we can rule out the possibility that your subconscious obtained corresponding knowledge from the seal's corruption. Without a knowledge base, you couldn't imagine those abilities from nothing. They're not imaginary."

The woman's tone suddenly turned grave.
"Clearly, at some point before Cordu was destroyed, you saw Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and the others use their abilities. Moreover, you were neither harmed nor traumatized. Otherwise, it would have manifested in the dream.
"From the dream's analysis, what truly left a scar on you was Pualis and company's actions.
"How do you think you witnessed those evil god followers using their powers?"
Susie's words were like sharp arrows piercing Lumian's memories, making the sturdy barrier waver.
Lumian's face twisted slightly.
Amidst excruciating pain, he saw images surface from the depths of his memories.
It was the third floor of the administrator's castle. The walls were adorned with pale, translucent faces, but the fighters were no longer Ryan, Leah, and Valentine. Instead, it was Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and Sybil Berry!

Chapter 128: In the Dream

Blood-red flowers bloomed on the pitch-black vines hanging from the ceiling, sealing off the third floor of the castle.

Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and Sybil Berry fought off the 'midwife' and her accomplices as they charged towards the tower.

A series of fragmented scenes flashed through Lumian's mind.

In a tower filled with bird-clawed infants, the invisible Guillaume Bénet touched the midwife's shoulder with the help of Shepherd Pierre Berry. The midwife exploded as if a bomb had been planted inside her.

Though Sybil Berry had been killed by the lady's maid, she was reborn in the other woman's body and took control of it.

Floating in the air, Louis Lund gave birth to a child in the room.

Unfazed, Louis Lund teamed up with Administrator Béost to subdue Shepherd Pierre Berry.

In the wilderness leading deep into the mountains, the padre, Guillaume Bénet, was surrounded by countless undead in linen garments...

Lumian's face contorted in pain. These memories felt like a sharp weapon piercing his soul. Extracting them would do more harm, making him instinctively resist recalling them further.

Eventually, the scenes faded, and Lumian panted heavily.

"How was it? Did you find anything?" Susie's voice was gentle, as if inquiring about today's breakfast.

Lumian pondered and replied, "I remember the battle between the padre and Madame Pualis's subordinates. The scene was chaotic and fragmented...

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm watching in person, and at times from afar via certain means..."

This left him deeply puzzled about his position and role in these events.

At times, he seemed to be part of the two groups, embroiled in the conflict. Other times, he appeared to be a mere bystander, unconnected to either side.

Susie asked, leading him on, "Besides that, is there anything else you don't understand about the situation in your memory?"

Lumian said as he recalled, "I don't think I saw Madame Pualis... She only appeared when the padre was surrounded by a horde of undead in the wilderness...

"The padre and his allies seemed drained after dealing with Louis Lund, Cathy, Béost, the midwife, and Madame Pualis's subordinates. If Madame Pualis had joined, I don't think they could have won...

"Why did Madame Pualis willingly give up and leave Cordu without stopping the padre and his allies..."
"Not willingly, but forcibly sent away," Susie corrected him. "The ritual in your dream to send the Spring Elf away should be about sending Pualis away. The Spring Elf symbolizes a bountiful harvest, the end of a harsh winter, and the budding of new life. It's very similar to the abilities displayed by Pualis's group."
"That's even stranger..." Lumian's voice grew pained as he clenched his fists, feeling unable to remember any more.
Susie said gently, "If you don't want to recall, don't. Recovering all your memories isn't something that can be achieved in one session of therapy. Take your time. There's no rush."
Phew... Lumian slowly exhaled a sigh of relief, his body relaxing.
After he had calmed down for nearly a minute, Susie said, "You can sleep and see if you can find more answers in your dreams."
At first, the Psychiatrist's voice was gentle in Lumian's ears, but then it became increasingly ethereal, as if it had receded and entered another world.
His eyelids grew heavier and heavier until they finally closed.
...
Lumian's eyes snapped open to the familiar ceiling above him.
He bolted upright, taking in the reclining chair, the wooden table by the window, the small bookshelf, and the wardrobe with its full-length mirror.
This was his bedroom, his home in Cordu.
For a few seconds, Lumian stared blankly before leaping out of bed and sprinting from the room.
He flung open Aurore's bedroom door and found the desk littered with manuscripts, papers, fountain pens, ink bottles, and other items, just as he remembered. He noticed the chair with the pillow was empty.
His gaze shifted to the vacant bed before slowly retracting.
Quietly, he closed the door and moved to the next room.
No familiar figure awaited him in the study either.
Lumian raced downstairs.
He dashed through Cordu Village, arriving at the entrance of the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.
Not a single villager crossed his path. Every house was eerily silent.
Gazing up at the onion-like dome, Lumian strode into the cathedral.
The altar had been altered, adorned with tulips, lilacs, and other flowers. A black thorn symbol was etched into it, seemingly with liquid flowing on its surface.

Still, nobody was here.
Lumian searched the padre's room before heading to the basement.
Piles of bones and sheepskin lay around, just as in his previous dream, but the altar in the middle remained untouched.
He examined it cautiously but felt no burning sensation in his chest.
Realizing this was a dream, the power representing the past, present, and future seemed to have vanished.
Having gained nothing, Lumian stood by the underground altar, deep in thought. He then dashed up the stairs, out the side door, and into the nearby cemetery.
Guided by the memories of his previous dream, he quickly located the tomb where the owl had flown in. Crouching down, he pushed open the stone slab sealing the entrance.
Without hesitation, Lumian descended the stairs, traversed the passageway, and found the black coffin in the shadowy tomb.
No owl was present, nor was there another Lumian. Only the faint light seeping in from outside illuminated the scene.
In a daze, Lumian turned his attention to the black coffin.
The lid had already slid to the side, revealing its contents.
Hesitating for a moment, Lumian recalled Aurore nearly losing control in his dream when she spied on the dead Warlock's corpse in the coffin.
Two or three seconds later, his expressionless steps carried him forward, approaching the black coffin. He cast his gaze inside.
A corpse quickly appeared before his eyes.
With golden hair cascading down its sides and eyes tightly shut, the corpse's pale-white face was adorned with a light blue dress.
It was Aurore!
Aurore lay in the coffin of the dead Warlock!
Lumian's pupils dilated, his face contorting with horror.
The scene before him fractured, crumbling inch by inch.
...
Lumian's eyes snapped open, his expression a mix of bewilderment and dread.
"What did you see?" Susie's voice echoed in his ears.
Lumian replied in a distant tone, "I saw Aurore lying in the coffin of the deceased Warlock...
"How can this be..."
Susie reassured him, "This is more symbolic.
"Consider this: there's no real Warlock legend, and in the dream, the story you subconsciously created transformed your and Aurore's home into the Warlock's former residence. Aurore knows

nothing about this or the legend.
"Her loss of control was because she wanted to see the Warlock's corpse in the coffin clearly."
"So, the Warlock who died in the legend represents Aurore. What does the owl symbolize? What does the entire story signify?" Questions flooded Lumian's mind, each like a sharp blade tearing at his head.
Lumian instinctively raised his hands to clutch his head.
"You might need to recover more memories before you can analyze it. Moreover, sometimes, multiple layers of symbolism exist in a mixed state," Susie said gently. "That's enough for today's treatment. Your subconscious is already resisting. Continuing may backfire and harm your mental state. Would you like the second treatment in two weeks or a month?"
Lumian didn't hesitate.
"Two weeks from now."
Susie paused for a few seconds before adding, "Lastly, I must remind you that you have a strong tendency for self-destruction."
"Self-destruction..." Lumian repeated the words, his expression unchanged.
Susie's voice carried warmth again.
"I understand why this happened, and I don't want to forcibly eliminate it. Unless you're willing to let me erase all memories at the root of the problem, every treatment will only alleviate, not eradicate it.
"I just want to remind you that Aurore loves living and life.
"She has many unfulfilled wishes. She wants to see you attend university. She wants to travel to Trier as an ordinary person for a while. She wants to find clues about her home. She wants to resolve her issues with her parents. She wants to savor all of Trier's delicacies, attend every concert, and experience every art exhibition.
"She's one step away from complete death. If she's conscious, I don't think she'd give up. She's like someone who's fallen into an abyss, clinging to the cliff edge with one hand. If even you give up, no one will pull her up again."
Lumian's expression shifted, but he couldn't show any defined emotions.
It seemed he had forgotten how to smile or cry.
Susie didn't pressure him to respond. She sighed softly and said, "Many times, suppressing pain and despair isn't helpful. Humans need to vent and relieve stress.
"Alright, that's it for today. We'll meet again for the second treatment, same time in two weeks."

Lumian closed his eyes.
"Thank you, Madame Susie."
Susie didn't reply, as if she had already left.
After more than ten seconds, Lumian slowly exhaled and opened his eyes.
He instinctively glanced outside Mason's Café and saw a golden retriever with a small brown bag vanishing around the corner.
A female figure appeared to be beside the dog.
Lumian lingered for another ten minutes before finishing the remaining ambergris lemonade. He stepped out of Mason's Café and made his way to the nearest public carriage stop.
A green double-decker carriage pulled up, inviting passengers to board.
Lumian paid 30 coppets and found a window seat, his gaze distant.
"Read all about it! Only 11 coppets each!" A child in old clothes approached the window, hoisting a stack of newspapers in his hand.
Self-destruct... live... self-destruct... live... Lumian's mind replayed the psychiatrist's words. He felt like a walking corpse, oblivious to the newsboy.
Suddenly, he noticed the newspaper's title—Novel Weekly.
That's right, it's Sunday... Lumian snapped back to reality. He handed the child two 5-coppet copper coins and one 1-coppet copper coin, opened the window, and grabbed a copy of Novel Weekly.
Unfolding the newspaper, Lumian began to read, illuminated by the bright sunlight streaming through the window.
As the carriage slowly rolled forward, a message caught Lumian's eye:
"Obituary:
"Our eternal friend, the renowned bestselling author, Aurore Lee, has been confirmed by our editorial team to have passed away in an accident in April..."
Lumian's gaze froze, his hands trembling.
Abruptly, he lowered his head, raised the newspaper, and shielded his face with it.
A wet mark materialized on the newspaper's surface in the afternoon sun.
More and more wet marks emerged, merging into one splatter.

Chapter 129: Neighbor

Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

Lumian tossed the wrinkled newspaper onto the table and slumped onto the bed.

After a few moments, he collapsed onto the mattress. Exhaustion coursed through his veins, making it nearly impossible to resist the urge to sleep.

He reset his body and mental state each day, but never his mind.

Too tired to bother undressing, he kicked off his leather shoes and closed his eyes.

Lumian slept deeply, dreamless.

The acrid scent of sulfur roused him from his sleep. The sun was still setting outside the window.

Lumian turned his head to gaze at the glass window, tinged with a golden-red hue, and whispered sarcastically, "Could it be that I've slept for a day and a night?"

It was clearly impossible; he always woke up automatically at 6 a.m.

Though the obituary had helped vent the sorrow in his heart, Lumian still felt somewhat despondent.

He knew that grief wouldn't simply vanish, and pain would inevitably resurface. He had to maintain a stable mental state and face his emotions without spiraling into self-destruction.

As for extreme, mad, and self-destructive tendencies, he accepted that these were inevitable, as long as they weren't severe.

I have to undergo psychiatric treatment regularly in the future. Otherwise, I'll completely lose my mind before I complete my revenge and find a way to revive Aurore. Lumian sighed and got out of bed.

He picked up the wrinkled Novel Weekly again and studied the obituary on the front page, seeking to reawaken the familiar pain in his heart.

Then, Lumian noticed an issue.

This paper was from last week.

The paperboy had sold him an outdated newspaper!

Impossible. It's impossible for a paperboy to keep a newspaper copy that can't be sold... Lumian furrowed his brow, finding this odd coincidence inexplicable.

He carefully recalled something that Psychiatrist Susie had said: "Many times, suppressing pain and despair isn't helpful. Humans need to vent and relieve stress..."

Suddenly, Lumian understood.

This was part of his psychiatric treatment!

Madame Susie had first identified my unstable mental state and strong self-destructive tendencies. Then, she used the hope of reviving Aurore as an initial counsel. Finally, while I wallowed in my pain, she arranged for the paperboy to deliver a week-old obituary. She shattered my defenses with cold, hard facts, allowing me to release the pain and despair I had buried deep inside... Lumian mused silently.

Realizing this, he was grateful for encountering a highly skilled and professional psychiatrist. Without her, escaping his mental quagmire would have been nearly impossible.

As Lumian's gaze drifted, he noticed a few bedbugs scurrying into his room.

His keen sense of smell told him the sulfur in the neighboring room had been lit to repel the bedbugs, but the vermin mostly fled elsewhere.

Lumian chuckled at the thought of him and his neighbor inadvertently "attacking" each other by driving the bedbugs into each other's rooms.

He slipped on his leather shoes and strode out of Room 207, heading for Room 206.

On the second floor of Auberge du Coq Doré, nestled in an alley behind Rue Anarchie, a washroom connected rooms 201 to 204. Opposite Room 204 was another washroom, with rooms 205 to 208 on the other side. A sizable balcony graced both sides of the corridor, so the third, fourth, and fifth floors each held ten rooms and two washrooms.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Lumian rapped his knuckles on Room 206's door.

"Who is it?" A slightly flustered voice called from inside.

"I'm from Room 207 next door," Lumian replied, grinning. "I want to get to know my neighbor."

Moments later, the door creaked open, revealing a lanky young man before Lumian.

Barely 1.7 meters tall, the man wore a faded linen shirt and black suspenders. Oversized black-framed glasses perched on his nose, and his unkempt, greasy brown hair looked as if it hadn't been washed for days. His dark-brown eyes betrayed his wariness.

"What can I do for you?" the man inquired.

Flashing a smile, Lumian extended his right hand.

"I'll be staying here for a while, so I figured I should get to know my neighbors. What's your name?"

The young man hesitated before reaching out and shaking Lumian's hand.

"Gabriel, and yours?"

"Ciel." Lumian glanced into Room 206, feigning curiosity. "Why are you burning sulfur now? It's already evening—time to head out for food."
Gabriel adjusted his glasses and offered a wry smile.
"I'm a playwright, and I'm planning to write all night."
"An author?" Lumian raised his hand to his chin, abandoning his plan to play a prank on his neighbor to break the ice.
Gabriel clarified, "Playwright, actually. I specialize in writing plays for various theaters."
"Sounds impressive," Lumian praised sincerely. "I admire people who can write stories. My idol is an author."
Gabriel, flattered by the praise and Lumian's genuine expression, scratched his messy brown hair and sighed.
"This line of work isn't as glamorous as it seems. I poured my heart into my last script, which I think rivals the classics, but no theater manager will give it a chance.
"So I take on requests from tabloids, churning out trite stories to pay rent and avoid starvation. Right now, I'm rushing to finish one of those manuscripts. The editors just want steamy scenes with the female characters—that's what their readers crave..."
Perhaps it was because he had triggered a scar in his heart, Gabriel was driven by an urge to share his struggles.
Lumian listened intently before responding with sincerity, "I've read many authors' biographies and interviews. Most of them experienced hardship, living in cheap hotels or cramped attics. I believe you'll find someone who appreciates your work and helps you become a renowned playwright."
Gabriel removed his glasses and rubbed his face.
"You're only the second person to encourage me. Everyone else mocks my dreams, accusing me of being out of touch with reality."
If it weren't for the fact that you share a profession similar to Aurore's, I would've mocked you too. And my mockery would be worse than theirs... Lumian thought, before asking curiously, "Who was the first person to encourage you?"
"Miss Séraphine, from Room 309," Gabriel replied, glancing at the ceiling. "She's a figure model. I haven't seen her in a few days. She might've moved out."
The same figure model Ruhr and his wife mentioned? Lumian nodded and extended an invitation.
"How about a drink at the bar?"
Gabriel was sorely tempted but ultimately declined.
"Another time. I have to submit my manuscript tomorrow."
"Alright." Lumian waved and returned to his room.
Peering out the window at the bustling Rue Anarchie, Lumian

resolved to find a restaurant and indulge in Trier's culinary delights.
Just then, a shrill female voice echoed from upstairs:
"You bastard! You pig!
"Your mother spawned you with a devil..."
The cursing halted abruptly, as if silenced by force.
Lumian's heart raced as he flung open the window.
"If you're so fond of women, why not go to your mother?
"..."
This time, Lumian pinpointed the voice to the fourth floor.
Miss Ethans, the one forced into prostitution? He recalled Charlie's description.
That also meant Margot—the leader of the Poison Spur Mob—had arrived with his henchmen to collect their dues.
In the Intis Republic, there were two types of prostitutes: the registered ones in places like Rue de la Muraille and Rue de Breda, and the unregistered, illegal ones. The latter, who neither paid taxes nor could do their business without the authorities stepping in, outnumbered the former by ten or even twenty times.
After some contemplation, Lumian donned a dark suit and positioned himself between Rooms 202 and 203. A staircase led to the next floor.
He retrieved the cheap cologne he'd purchased from Bigorre, intending to pour it on the wooden steps for Margot and his henchmen to tread upon as they passed.
Unsure when the Montsouris ghost's next attack would strike, Lumian was desperate to find his prey and complete the fate exchange.
After a brief moment, he abandoned the idea of directly pouring the cologne, opting instead for a more discreet approach to avoid detection by any Beyonder powers.
Lumian loosened the lid and feigned a clumsy slip of his hand, failing to grip the thick glass bottle securely.
With a clang, the cologne bottle hit the bottom step, and some liquid seeped out, the pungent fragrance filling the air.
Lumian crouched down, feigning frustration, picked up the bottle, and screwed the lid back on.
He smeared the spilled cologne with his palm, rubbing it against his body to not waste it.
Soon, most of the liquid had evaporated, and the night breeze pouring into the balcony swept away the lingering scent.
Only then did Lumian retreat to Room 207. He concealed himself by leaning against the door frame while keeping an eye on the stairwell.

After more than ten minutes, footsteps sounded from above.
By now, the cologne in the corridor had significantly dissipated.
A thin man led four others down the stairs.
With closely cropped yellow hair, single-lidded blue eyes, a prominent nose bridge, thin lips, and faint scars on his face, the man suspected to be Margot wore a red shirt and a dark leather vest. His hands were tucked into his milky-white pants as he descended step by step.
A bulge on his left waist hinted at a hidden weapon, and his feet were clad in strapless leather boots.
Suddenly, the man frowned and deftly leaped over the two steps and a section of the second-floor corridor tainted with cologne.
The three male thugs trailing him failed to detect anything unusual and trampled the remaining traces of the scent.
Lumian's heart pounded at the sight.
Is Margot acutely sensitive to smells, with a strong aversion to being contaminated by peculiar odors?

Chapter 130: Tracking

Lumian recognized Margot's actions all too well.

He would have done the same!

Then, he remembered Aurore mentioning that Beyonders from the Hunter pathway were relatively common in the Intis Republic. Lumian suspected that Margot might also be a Beyonder from the Hunter pathway, but he couldn't determine his Sequence.

A mob boss wouldn't have a high Sequence unless necessary... If Margot is truly a Hunter pathway Beyonder, he shouldn't surpass Sequence 7. Furthermore, the likelihood of him being a Pyromaniac is slim. Leah and Valentine, only at Sequence 7, are already considered elite investigators. Could they be inferior to a high-ranking thug who patrols the territory, abducts women, and bullies prostitutes? Lumian pondered silently as he stepped back and averted his gaze.

Although it seemed improbable that Margot had reached or even exceeded Sequence 7, Lumian dared not be careless.

What if his Sequence title was something like 'Scoundrel' which required him to act like one?

What if the Poison Spur Mob was more complex than it appeared, merely an extension of a secret organization or underground cult with ample resources, deliberately avoiding ostentation to evade official scrutiny?

The odds were slim, but lacking information and relevant mystical knowledge, Lumian had to remain vigilant. He couldn't eliminate the possibilities or gauge their likelihood.

In the second-floor corridor, the man suspected to be Margot—clad in a red shirt and black vest with his hands in his pockets—turned to his three subordinates.

Frowning slightly, he seemed puzzled and mildly displeased by their unnecessary contact with the cologne.

He glanced at the ground and sniffed.

The cologne wasn't confined to the stairwell; it brazenly led to Room 207. Moreover, the bottom step bore fresh marks of being struck by a light, small object.

In an instant, the man presumed to be Margot reconstructed the scene in his mind based on the environmental clues:

The tenant in Room 207 might have visited the washroom or a neighbor. On their way back, they intended to apply cologne but dropped the bottle on the stairs. Then, they spread the cologne on their body, leaving only faint traces.

This was consistent with the mindset of Auberge du Coq Doré's tenants.

The man thought to be Margot dismissed his suspicions and instructed his three subordinates, "Remember to change your shoes when you return to Salle de Gristmill."
"Alright, Boss," the trio replied almost in unison.
It wasn't surprising; they were frequently asked to do something similar.
Salle de Gristmill... From Room 207, Lumian overheard their conversation and grew increasingly certain that the man suspected to be a Hunter pathway Beyonder was Margot.
After chatting with Charlie that morning, he strolled around Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district, conversing with vendors and bar patrons. He learned that Salle de Gristmill at 3 Rue Anarchie was one of the Poison Spur Mob's strongholds.
Only when Margot and his crew reached the bottom did Lumian don his wide-brimmed hat and leisurely exit the room. He trailed the lingering scent of cologne, venturing deeper into the street.
Seven or eight minutes later, he arrived at Salle de Gristmill. The faint odor of cheap cologne confirmed that Margot and his subordinates had returned.
Salle de Gristmill lacked the grand statue and inscriptions of Salle de Bal Brise. It merely occupied a section of the street and featured a golden-hued lobby.
Gas lamps encased by glass covers and black crossed bars on four stone pillars illuminating the entrance hall dispelled the evening's darkness.
At that moment, the dance hall buzzed with activity. Lumian heard singing, raucous laughter, and the strumming of instruments before stepping inside.
The layout resembled Salle de Bal Brise, with a dance floor in the center surrounded by small round tables and chairs. A low wooden platform at the front held a sultry woman.
Clad in a provocative short white top, her bra's row of bows was clearly visible. A black mole adorned her lips, and her brownish-yellow hair was swept up in a bun. Her makeup emphasized her large, deep-set blue eyes, creating a seductive, decadent allure.
Softly crooning, she occasionally kicked her right leg. Her cream-colored, fluffy knee-length skirt enticed patrons to try peeking beneath it.
"The consulting physician has an alluring air,
"He'll first prepare by pushing up his sleeves with care,
"It takes me back to my initial romance,
"But this fine medic, he stands apart with just a glance,
"He locates the sweet spot with such finesse and speed,
"Discerning, my love, his touch is skilled indeed."

Amid the suggestive and captivating performance, Lumian approached the bar counter and asked the bartender, "What's there to eat?"
The bartender smiled and inquired, "How about Rouen Meatloaf? Or do you prefer standard fare like sausages, bread, and smoked meat?"
Lumian, already aware of the Trieriens' fondness for meatloaf, nodded.
"Then, two servings of Rouen Meatloaf."
"And a glass of apple punch? It can counteract the richness of the meatloaf." The bartender sensed a generous customer when Lumian didn't inquire about the price and suggested a slightly pricier drink.
Punch was a fruit juice cocktail.
Lumian smiled. "Sure."
With nearly 200 verl d'or remaining, Lumian didn't need to be overly frugal with his food and drink. In any case, scrimping wouldn't be enough to cover the outstanding payment for information broker Anthony Reid.
"3 licks for each Rouen Meatloaf and 12 licks for the apple punch," the bartender quickly quoted the price.
Lumian nodded and pulled out a verl d'or silver coin, adorned with a small angel relief and a diffused line on the surface, tossing it to the bartender.
After pocketing the two 5 coppet bronze coins in change, he waited patiently.
By then, the female singer on stage had finished her performance, and the band played a slightly intense drumbeat.
Customers flocked to the dance floor, swaying to the rhythm, releasing the day's pressure, fatigue, and pain.
A man sitting nearby grinned at his companion and said, "I love this atmosphere so much. I wonder who invented this kind of gyrating dance. It's far more appealing than the old quadrille! Can you imagine? I'd often have a partner in my arms, only to wait ages for my turn to dance. My enthusiasm would've cooled by then."
The quadrille, or square dancing, involved four men and women forming a square and dancing to a violinist's performance before circling each other.
Another man chuckled and said, "I still prefer the Can-can and Striptease."
The Can-can, popular in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge, featured high kicks and landing splits as signature moves. When women lined up in short skirts and stockings, kicking high, cheers and

thrown coins often followed.
Of course, it was a technically demanding dance. A skilled dancer needed to kick their leg as high as their nose or close to their ears.
Lumian absorbed the surrounding sounds, occasionally glancing at the stairs where the cheap cologne scent vanished.
Soon, two thick meatloaves and a dreamy, transparent alcoholic beverage with a red top and floating ice cubes arrived.
Lumian sipped the apple punch, refreshed by the sweetness, faint tartness, and smoothness of the alcohol. The ice's coldness invigorated him.
He then bit into the Rouen Meatloaf, unable to resist the blend of unfermented dough's sweetness, minced meat's flavor, oil's aroma, and spices' kick.
After devouring a whole meatloaf, he sipped the apple punch to cleanse his palate.
Post-dinner, Lumian clutched his drink, listening to the girl's singing and watching the dance floor crowd.
The feverish atmosphere seemed to affect him as he occasionally swayed to the rhythm at the dimly lit bar counter.
Each time, Lumian would steal a glance at the stairs, monitoring Margot and his subordinates' movements.
It was midnight when Margot—clad in a red shirt, leather vest, and sporting short, vertical, light-yellow hair—descended the stairs with three thugs and exited Salle de Gristmill.
Aware that the other party might be a Hunter pathway Beyonder, Lumian didn't follow immediately. He was prepared to lose them since the gang's leather shoes, once soaked in cheap cologne, had been changed. Relying on his sense of smell to track them from a distance was no longer an option.
Still, he harbored some hope. He'd noticed that most dance hall customers were too engrossed and frenzied, occasionally spilling alcohol on the floor, creating wet spots from the stairs to the exit.
Swaying to the rhythm, Lumian observed from the corner of his eye that Margot consistently avoided the damp ground. This further solidified his belief that Margot was a Hunter pathway Beyonder.
As for Margot's three subordinates, despite their attempts to dodge the wet areas, their limited observation skills and the dim gas wall lamp lighting led to their feet or heels inevitably getting wet.
For those frequenting bars and dance halls, it was unavoidable. Margot had grown numb to it, not considering it an issue or giving it much thought.
Almost a minute after they left, Lumian rose from the bar counter and stepped out of Salle de Gristmill.

With few pedestrians on the streets, only the occasional drunkard's singing and cursing broke the silence. Ruined gas street lamps cast a feeble light, with the sky's crimson moonlight providing the main illumination.

The four gas wall lamps at the dance hall entrance allowed Lumian to spot numerous wet footprints. Some had long since faded, while others were fresh.

Three sets of footprints appeared in close proximity and consistently at the same time. Upon closer inspection, Lumian discovered a faint, difficult-to-notice set of footprints without any wet stains leading the way.

Lumian chuckled, whispering to himself, "Constantly hanging out with fools and vermin will only bring you harm."

Chapter 131: Night Fight

Under the crimson moon's glow, a gas street lamp illuminated the area from a distance. Lumian identified the footprints and followed them at a measured pace.

Before long, the wet spots dried up entirely, ceasing to provide clues. However, Lumian had memorized the size, sole patterns, and gait characteristics of the four sets of footprints, ensuring he wouldn't confuse them with others.

Even so, tracking them proved challenging. Unlike the ruins of Cordu Village, thousands of people traversed Rue Anarchie and its surroundings daily, leaving countless overlapping footprints that obscured and destroyed each other, making it difficult to pinpoint a target.

Compounding the challenge, vendors littered the streets with trash, and the terrible environment created other distractions. At times, Lumian felt like he was searching for a drop of water in the ocean.

Fortunately, it was midnight, and few pedestrians were out. Most were alcoholics, whose distinct smell and staggered footprints Lumian could dismiss at a glance.

Additionally, Margot and his crew hadn't been gone long, so many traces remained undamaged. Lumian barely managed to keep up.

Occasionally, due to the environment or Margot's caution, the footprints would abruptly vanish. But Lumian remained undeterred. He composed himself, searching forward, left, and right over considerable distances for new traces. Through trial and error, he eventually found the footprints he sought.

Thus, Lumian tracked them to Rue du Rossignol in the market district, stopping in front of a five-story apartment building far from several cheap dance halls.

Margot and his subordinates' footprints led inside.

Upon careful examination, Lumian confirmed that the three thugs had eventually left and walked in different directions.

In other words, Margot was the only one remaining in an apartment room.

He doesn't need his subordinates' protection, confident in his own strength... Lumian silently mused, growing more certain that his target was a Beyonder.

He surveyed the pitch-black corridor, considering how a Hunter might handle corresponding traces before returning to their actual residence. He suspected that even with a carbide lamp and meticulous searching, locating Margot would be near-impossible, and he might even fall into a prearranged trap.

After some contemplation, Lumian formulated a preliminary plan. He averted his gaze and headed to the adjacent street.
Before long, he encountered a staggering drunk man in his twenties who could barely walk.
As the man reached a malfunctioning gas street lamp and began to vomit, Lumian lowered his hat and approached. In a hushed tone, he said, "I want to buy your shirt for 1.5 verl d'or."
The drunkard's initial reaction was to question whether he was so intoxicated that he was hallucinating.
He wore a gray-blue tweed shirt he'd purchased from a cheap clothing store in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman for only 1 verl d'or. Now, someone wanted to spend 1.5 verl d'or, or 30 licks, on this old garment he'd worn for two years!
Am I crazy, or is this guy crazy? The drunkard strained to look up at his counterpart, but the dim light only revealed a shadowy figure in the darkness.
The next moment, two cold coins appeared in his hand.
Instinctively, the drunkard weighed the coins and felt the patterns etched into the metal.
He belched and asked, "Why do you want to buy it?"
"If you're unwilling, I'll find someone else." Lumian feigned taking back the silver coins.
Without further questioning, the drunkard grumbled and slowly removed his coat, emptying the pockets.
As Lumian departed with the clothes, the drunkard looked up with difficulty and waved his hand.
"Haha, lunatic. Lunatic who gives money... Blargh..."
By the time Lumian returned to the apartment block on Rue du Rossignol, he had changed into a dark-blue cap, a gray-blue tweed coat, faded pants, and a pair of worn, dirty leather shoes.
In addition to items he would use later, he had spent a total of 12 verl d'or.
Lumian glanced at the unlit apartment and suddenly found himself bewildered.
Why do I have to target a Beyonder like Margot?
His three subordinates were hardly innocent, and they were clearly weak. They didn't know how to cover their tracks, so dealing with them shouldn't be much harder than killing a chicken...
The fate of being attacked by the Montsouris ghost wouldn't discriminate!
Why was I fixated on hunting Margot?
I wasn't like this before. When necessary, I could be ruthless, and I could keep things simple. I wouldn't burden myself

unnecessarily...
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian's lips curled into a faint smile.
He realized he had 'instinctively' chosen more dangerous prey because it appeared more challenging, making him feel more at ease and carefree.
Lumian gazed at his left chest concealed beneath his clothes, suspecting this change resulted from the corruption within his body.
After a few seconds of silence, he suppressed a soft chuckle.
"From the looks of it, I'm a little crazy..."
He didn't plan on changing his target; it was as if he could already smell the stench of blood.
This was both a blessing and a curse.
With his cap pulled low, Lumian carried a pile of items and circled to the rear of the target apartment.
He arranged the fatty meat, flammable sofa stuffing, and other items against the wall, creating a fireproof barrier around them.
Next, Lumian struck a match and tossed it onto the pile.
The sparks rapidly spread across the most combustible materials, quickly growing and consuming everything around them.
Black smoke billowed.
As the dense smoke enveloped the area, Lumian shouted,
"Fire! Fire!"
He then raced back to the front of the apartment and retreated into the shadows of a nearby corner.
His plan was simple: since he didn't know which room Margot occupied or what traps he had set, he'd force Margot to reveal himself!
If Margot were a Pyromaniac, he'd certainly sense that the flames and smoke below couldn't cause a real inferno. His reaction would differ greatly, allowing Lumian to determine Margot's Sequence and decide whether to proceed or abort the plan.
With the rising smoke, flickering flames, and Lumian's cries, the apartment's tenants and those from neighboring buildings rushed down the stairs to the street.
As the fire wasn't large and the smoke hadn't penetrated the apartment, no one risked jumping out.
Remaining silent, Lumian focused intently on the apartment entrance while others 'replaced' him to shout and search for the fire's origin.
Seconds later, a figure leaped from a second-floor window, landing with ease.
It was Margot—dressed in a red shirt and long milky-white pants!

Relying on his Beyonder abilities and living on a lower floor, Margot hadn't taken the stairs like the other tenants. Instead, he jumped out the window.
Upon landing, he glanced back at the apartment, realizing the fire wasn't serious at all. There had been no need for him to jump out, making him appear panicked and foolish.
In that instant, Margot spotted a figure wearing a peaked cap and gray-blue shirt emerge from a corner.
The figure, head lowered, pointed at Margot and laughed.
"Look, this guy is such an idiot!"
Margot's emotions erupted with a fury.
His eyes tinted red as he lunged at the man mocking him.
He was fast, but the figure was faster. He had already turned and darted into the nearest alley.
All Margot wanted was to teach the guy a lesson and chase him down.
The pair raced into the dark, deserted alley, one tailing the other.
Tap! Tap! Tap! The figure sprinted to a barricade and vaulted over it with a push from his right hand.
Upon landing, he saw the figure stop and turn around.
The moment he landed, he saw the figure stop and turn around.
Under the crimson moonlight, Margot saw the face beneath the dark-blue cap.
It was swathed in layers of white bandages, revealing only nostrils, eyes, and ears.
The figure's left hand was similarly wrapped, gripping a sinister-looking, pewter-black dirk.
Margot's pupils widened, and his heart skipped a beat.
He instantly realized he had fallen prey to some kind of Provocation.
Suppressing his unease, Margot drew the black revolver from his waist.
He aimed at Lumian and activated Provocation.
"With that knife? Idiot, this is the age of the gun!"
Bang!
Margot pulled the trigger, sending a bullet straight for Lumian's head.
Lumian suddenly arched backward, as if forming a bridge.
Then, he snapped horizontally, dodging Margot's second bullet.
Next, Lumian straightened like a coiled spring and hurled Fallen Mercury at Margot as if it were a flying dagger.
Anticipating that his enemy had a Provocation-like ability and possibly poisoned the weapon, Margot dared not confront it head-on. He hastily twisted his body, allowing the pewter-black dirk to

sail past him and embed into a crack in the barricade.
As he evaded the attack, Margot saw Lumian pounce on him like a tiger.
Only then did he notice that Lumian's ears were stuffed with thick wads of paper, rendering him almost immune to Margot's Provocation!
The best understanding of a Hunter always came from another Hunter!
This revelation infuriated Margot once more, as if he had been silently 'Provoked' by his opponent's prowess.
Bam! Lumian clenched his right fist and struck Margot's temples with a sharp crack.
Margot blocked it with his left arm.
Simultaneously, he raised his right hand and aimed the revolver at Lumian's head.
Let's see how you dodge at this close range!
In an instant, Lumian leaned forward as if to headbutt Margot's chest and grabbed his right wrist with his left hand.
Meanwhile, his right leg swung up with incredible flexibility.
Not at the back of his head, but at Fallen Mercury, lodged in a crack in the barricade beside him!
The sinister, pewter-black dirk soared into the air, propelled by Lumian's kick, and flew straight toward Margot.

Chapter 132: Black Scorpion

Crash!

Margot barely managed to dodge the deadly dirk hurtling towards him, but in doing so, he failed to move his revolver in sync with Lumian's rapid motion. The bullet struck the opposite wall, sending stone fragments flying.

With a metallic clink, Fallen Mercury zipped past Margot again and landed not far away on the ground.

Lumian straightened up and swiftly stomped his right foot onto the enemy's instep to stop him from raising his knee and slamming it into his abdomen.

In the blink of an eye, Lumian was nearly plastered to his opponent. He either slashed or slammed with both hands, or braced and blocked with his elbows. His feet delivered low kicks or stomps, and his knees jerked forward or bounced around. Margot was too preoccupied fending off these attacks to aim and fire.

The thug felt as if he were caught in a relentless storm of his opponent's blows. Moreover, Lumian stayed close, employing close-quarters combat techniques to prevent him from retreating and using his gun.

For Margot, such a fighting style was both foreign and dangerous.

Crash!

Margot's elbow smashed into the wall, causing the house to shudder.

Whack!

Margot's right wrist was twisted, and the black revolver slipped from his grasp, clattering to the ground.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Lumian unleashed a barrage of hands, elbows, knees, and feet, forcing the enemy to retreat repeatedly.

Towards the end, Margot could only block instinctively, his thoughts unable to keep pace with Lumian's swift movements.

However, he sensed that he had already deciphered the pattern of his opponent's attacks and anticipated the sequences that would follow. He could defend against all onslaughts with his muscle memory alone.

In just a moment, he would launch a counterattack!

Instinctively, Margot raised his right foot to block the incoming low kick.

But he met nothing.

Lumian's left foot extended diagonally, defying the limits of human flexibility. He hooked the pewter-black dirk that lay silently beside him.

He had attacked Margot to force him to draw near to Fallen

Mercury.
The pewter-black dirk dirk soared up and stabbed Margot's thigh.
Margot found himself pinned down by Lumian while balancing precariously on one foot. He had little recourse but to retract his right foot and twist his body slightly to evade.
Fallen Mercury grazed his thigh and tore through his milky-white pants, leaving a shallow trail of blood.
Wham! Wham! Wham! Lumian went on the offensive once more with the close-quarters combat techniques Aurore had taught him, overwhelming Margot until he had no time to tend to his leg injuries.
Luckily, the wound was superficial and bled only slightly.
Crash!
Margot's back collided with the wall.
Throughout the entire encounter, he hadn't even had a chance to speak. The other party still had his ears plugged, unafraid of any provocation.
Margot's blood boiled, but it only served to fuel his determination. He planned to trade his injuries for an advantage and escape his current predicament.
At that moment, his raised arms met nothing.
He watched in confusion and shock as the strange man with the white bandages on his face voluntarily retreated and created distance.
Then, the mysterious man turned and sprinted away. As he ran, he flicked the pewter-black dirk up with his toes and snatched it in his left hand.
Momentarily stunned, Margot was about to give chase when footsteps echoed from the alley.
Hearing the gunshots, two patrolling police officers had rushed over with black semi-automatic revolvers, alerted by nearby residents who had "come downstairs" due to the fire.
"What happened? What's your Poison Spur Mob up to again?" one of the policemen demanded with a frown, recognizing Margot's face.
Margot shot a disdainful glance at the two officers in white shirts, black vests, and black uniform coats, and replied, "I was attacked. Officers, you're too late!"
Although he said this, he was secretly relieved the police hadn't arrived later and had scared the mysterious man away. Otherwise, he might have been hunted down.
After all, the strange man was likely a Sequence 8 Provoker. Moreover, his combat techniques were clearly superior to Margot's, and his cunning allowed him to gain the upper hand.

The policeman's face darkened.
"Then follow me back to give a statement. We'll help you find the assailant. Also, is this your gun?"
He pointed at the revolver that had fallen to the ground.
Margot sneered. "Rely on you to find him? Haha, that's the funniest joke I've heard this year! That gun belongs to the assailant. Take it away."
With that, he briefly examined his wound to ensure he wasn't poisoned.
Then, he sauntered out of the alley ahead of the two police officers.
The officer who had first spoken wore an ugly expression. He tried to draw his gun, but his partner held his hand down.
Returning to Rue du Rossignol, Margot's face hardened.
His first instinct was to hurry home and rely on the traps he had set up to guard against a second wave of attacks.
But a few seconds later, Margot dismissed the idea, feeling it wasn't sufficient.
He decided to go to the house of the Poison Spur Mob's boss, 'Black Scorpion' Roger, and inform him of the attack. He would stay there for the night.
That was the safest place for Margot.
Margot bandaged the wound on his right leg and sprinted from Rue du Rossignol to Avenue du Marché, making his way to the Suhit steam locomotive, and finally arriving at Unit 126, a three-story building with a small garden in the back.
Before long, he encountered Roger, the Black Scorpion, in the study.
A middle-aged man with firmly set black hair, Roger's slightly plump face was framed by cold, deep blue eyes.
Dressed in aqua-blue silk pajamas, Roger regarded Margot with a blank expression.
"You were attacked?"
"Yes." Margot recounted the events that had transpired.
Roger's blue eyes suddenly darkened, as if connected to a bottomless abyss or an eternally burning hell.
After a moment, he nodded.
"There are no signs of you being cursed. But you have to be careful. Your blood is on that knife."
As Roger spoke, he approached Margot.
"I'll help you eliminate any hidden dangers first."
Margot breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Boss."
He followed Roger out of the study and down the stairs into the basement.
Upon flipping the switch and illuminating the gas wall lamp, Roger pointed at the statue in the center and instructed, "Open it

and crawl inside."
The statue depicted a woman with gentle facial features, the folds of her long dress rendered vividly and lifelike.
Margot strode to the statue, pulled open the concealed door at its abdomen, and climbed in.
As the hidden door closed, an eerie silence filled the basement.
'Black Scorpion' Roger gazed at the statue and intoned a word in ancient Hermes.
"New life!"
Ghostly, indistinct black flames erupted from the statue's surface, flowing like water and burning silently.
After thirty seconds, Roger said to Margot, "You can come out now."
This ritual was a method for eliminating the hidden dangers of a curse. By entering the female statue's abdomen and reemerging, it symbolized a "rebirth." Coupled with the corresponding Beyonder powers, it could sever any connection with the item that had fallen into the enemy's hands.
"Wait for me in the study. I'll search for clues about the assailant," Roger instructed after ensuring Margot was unharmed.
Margot nodded and hastened out of the basement to the study. He pulled up a chair and settled into it.
As time ticked by, Margot suddenly felt his body becoming unbearably heavy, as if submerged in icy water.
His breathing grew labored.
Margot's pupils dilated, but he saw nothing.
He fought with all his strength, as if restrained by invisible ropes. He could barely move his arms, fingers, and feet.
Thud!
Margot finally collapsed to the floor, but the strange sensation persisted. His face turned an unnatural purple, and his mouth hung open. His thoughts grew increasingly murky.
Why... With this question in mind, Margot succumbed to the encroaching darkness.
At the basement door, Roger emerged with a grave expression.
He has potent anti-divination abilities...
This matter isn't simple...
Roger the Black Scorpion contemplated as he returned to the study.
In the next second, his gaze froze.
He discovered Margot sprawled on the ground, his face purple and his lower body soaked. He was no longer breathing.
After the Poison Spur Mob leader conducted a ritual to eliminate any lingering dangers of a curse, he mysteriously perished in the safest location of the Poison Spur Mob—right before Roger the Black Scorpion.

...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Lumian, now in fresh attire, nodded with satisfaction.
Fallen Mercury informed him through its vibrations that the fate exchange had been completed.
This meant Margot would instantly be assaulted by the Montsouris ghost.
Completing a fate exchange after stabbing someone took time—anywhere between five and thirty minutes, depending on the desired fate, the individual's strength, and their subconscious resistance. If Lumian was the target and he eagerly opened his mind and body, the fate exchange could be achieved swiftly—within seconds or even less than twenty.
Gazing at the pewter-black dirk in his hand, Lumian smirked.
"When I have time, I'll teach you Morse code. Otherwise, every time we communicate, I have to constantly narrow down options based on your feedback. It's far too tedious."
Fallen Mercury's quivering blade stilled, as if stunned.
Lumian, triumphant after a successful hunt, was in high spirits. He teased with a smile,
"Do you wonder why you should learn, even as a blade? Ambition is crucial. The same goes for being a blade. Do you want to remain like this forever?"
Then, he inquired, "What fate did you exchange this time?"
Lumian extended his spiritual sense to the pewter-black, patterned dirk.
With Fallen Mercury's assistance, he gradually deciphered the destiny droplets stored within the weapon.
It represented Margot's fate of receiving stacks of cash from his various underlings.
"You have a knack for choosing fates." Lumian had been occupied with fighting and had delegated the fate exchange to Fallen Mercury. He had merely informed it beforehand that he needed money.
After commending Fallen Mercury, Lumian grew pensive.
How will this fate manifest after the exchange?

Chapter 133: Suffering

Lumian couldn't make sense of it, but he didn't dwell on it either. He rolled up his sleeves, baring his right arm, and sliced it with the Fallen Mercury blade.

A brief moment of numbness was followed by a familiar pain, but he didn't flinch. He watched as blood oozed out and stained the silver-black blade crimson.

Almost instantaneously, a mercury illusory river, composed of intricate symbols, materialized before Lumian's eyes. The destiny droplets stored in the evil dirk seeped from its tip and flowed into the shallow wound.

Lumian concentrated, straining to discern the fate he sought to exchange.

He "saw" himself receiving treatment, "saw" himself falling asleep after releasing his emotions, and "saw" himself searching for Osta Trul...

Scenes flashed across Lumian's mind as if he had witnessed them firsthand.

Soon after, he located the fate of venturing outside the catacombs and encountering the Montsouris ghost from several days prior.

He swiftly raised the tip of Fallen Mercury and thrust it towards the complex symbols that appeared to be formed by the mercury river.

That fate proved heavy, and Lumian failed to stir it on his first attempt.

As the illusory river slowly faded, the scene in his mind became increasingly hazy. He hurriedly channeled most of his spirituality into the blade of Fallen Mercury.

At last, with a second stir, the fate of meeting the Montsouris ghost broke free from the illusory, mercury-hued river and shrank into a minuscule droplet, resembling a bead of mercury from a shattered thermometer.

The illusory droplet rapidly merged with the pewter-black dirk.

Only then did Lumian exhale a sigh of relief. He knew he had evaded the Montsouris ghost, and Fallen Mercury could now be deemed a Cursed Blade.

Once he treated the wound, an odd intuition suddenly struck him.

Guided by this intuition, Lumian exited Auberge du Coq Doré again, weaving between raucous drunks and a heated brawl. He returned to Rue du Rossignol and halted outside the alley where he had assaulted Margot.

Furrowing his brow, he cautiously entered and flipped over the barricade.

In the next moment, Lumian's gaze instinctively fell upon the shadow in the corner.
Something lay quietly in the realm of darkness.
Sensing its significance, Lumian hurried over, crouched down, and picked up the object with his gloved left hand.
It was a bulging brown leather wallet.
Margot dropped it? The money his underlings plundered and handed over to him? Lumian roughly grasped how the fate exchange had transpired.
Although he couldn't recall whether Margot had dropped the wallet during their fierce battle or if it had 'fallen' afterwards, it didn't prevent Lumian from claiming the money.
He extracted the thick wad of cash and emptied the gold, silver, and copper coins from the change purse. Then, he tossed the wallet aside and left the alley.
Back in Auberge du Coq Doré Room 207, Lumian lit the carbide lamp and meticulously counted his newfound fortune.
In total, he had acquired 1,265 verl d'or and 15 coppet. Most were banknotes worth 10 verl d'or or less. There was only one 200 verl d'or note, one 100 verl d'or note, and two 50 verl d'or notes. A few Louis d'or were included as well.
Lumian stared at the money for a few seconds before sighing deeply.
Even ten donations from 'benevolent souls' can't compare to taking down a gang leader...
Naturally, not all of the money belonged to Margot. He was merely holding onto it for the Poison Spur Mob.
Lumian grabbed a stack of small bills amounting to 200 verl d'or and left Room 207, climbing the stairs.
In under a minute, he reached the fourth floor and came to a stop in front of Room 8.
He recalled that Margot had visited Auberge du Coq Doré in the evening to collect most of the money from an unlicensed prostitute named Ethans.
At the time, one of Margot's underlings must have been in charge, but the money eventually ended up in Margot's possession.
Without knocking, Lumian crouched down and slid the stack of banknotes through the gap beneath the door.
He quickly straightened up, turned towards the stairs, and vanished into the shadowy corridor.
...
Lumian slept until six o'clock when the cathedral bell chimed.
He had slept soundly the night before, feeling as if the Provoker potion had been somewhat digested.

In the morning, I'll look for Osta Trul and see if Mr. K has replied. I'll also buy some better clothes and cosmetics from Quartier de l'Observatoire... In the afternoon, I'll visit the cheap clothing store at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman... Lumian wasn't eager to rise. He lay there, quietly contemplating the day's plans.
Having escaped the threat of the Montsouris ghost, he placed disguising himself back on his to-do list.
After lingering in bed for a while, he ambled to the washroom to freshen up. Then, he went downstairs and purchased half a liter of apple cider and a loaf of bread with pork sausages from the vendors.
Having sated his hunger, he headed to the nearest cathedral square and found an empty corner to practice the combat techniques Aurore had taught him.
Lumian returned to Auberge du Coq Doré at 9:30 a.m., intending to rest for an hour before seeking out Osta Trul.
Upon entering the motel lobby, he spotted three maids cleaning various filthy areas under Madame Fels's supervision.
The motel owner hires cleaners every Monday... Lumian averted his gaze and walked towards the staircase.
At that moment, footsteps echoed from above.
Within ten seconds, Charlie appeared before Lumian, clad in a linen shirt, dark pants, and strapless leather shoes.
"You didn't go to the hotel?" Lumian asked, puzzled.
Charlie yawned and replied excitedly, "Don't you know? I'm off today. We can take one day off a week and choose whichever day we want."
Lumian chuckled. "Does this day off result in a reduction in your 'monthly salary' from Madame Alice?"
Charlie grinned sheepishly. "She has her own social engagements."
As they conversed, a foul odor drifted in from the door. The short, disheveled, gray-haired Ruhr and Michel entered the hotel.
"You didn't go to the steam locomotive station?" Charlie greeted them warmly.
Ruhr approached them first, then maintained a respectful distance.
"The market district is a bit chaotic today. We plan to rest for a day."
"What happened?" Lumian inquired "curiously."
Ruhr instinctively lowered his voice. "Margot of the Poison Spur Mob is dead. Many gangsters are searching for someone. Other gangs might clash with them at any moment. There are also many police officers present."
"Margot's dead?" Charlie blurted out, astonished.

He had just thought the guy deserved to die yesterday, and now he was dead?
Ruhr nodded gravely.
"I've heard several people mention it. Sigh, we can't earn any money today."
His wife, Madame Michel, consoled him, "If we don't go out, we don't have to eat lunch. We can save some money."
Before Lumian could inquire about the situation outside, Charlie, snapping out of his daze, spun around and dashed upstairs.
Lumian's eyes flickered as he trailed behind.
Thud, thud, thud. Charlie rapidly ascended to the fourth floor and sprinted to Room 8.
Taking a deep breath, he slammed the wooden door.
"Who is it?" A slightly hoarse female voice emerged from within.
Charlie announced his name loudly.
"Didn't I say I'm off the clock in the morning? Come back in the afternoon. Remember, 10 verl d'or. No discount this time!" the female voice responded impatiently, opening the door.
This was Lumian's first encounter with the woman named Ethans. Her flaxen hair tumbled to her shoulders, her similarly-colored eyes wary and her face etched with apprehension.
She appeared to be twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with average looks that could only be described as delicate. Her face and clothes were clean, and her red dress exposed a generous expanse of fair skin on her chest.
Charlie excitedly informed Ethans, "Did you know? Margot is dead! He's really dead!"
"..." Ethans stared, dumbfounded.
After several seconds, her slightly hoarse voice turned sharp.
"Is that devil truly dead?"
"It's true." Charlie nodded without hesitation. "You can finally escape that devil! You can finally live like a normal person!"
Ethans glanced around, dazed, taking in Lumian's expressionless eyes and Charlie's animated countenance.
"He's dead? He's dead?" She murmured, thinking of the money that had mysteriously appeared in her room.
As she started to believe Margot was indeed dead, her vision blurred.
Tears poured down her cheeks. She couldn't help but squat down and bury her face in her arms.
Her sobbing intensified, becoming more uncontrollable.
At that moment, footsteps echoed from the staircase.
Lumian turned his head and saw a young man in a white shirt, coat, and black jacket approaching.

Behind him were Margot's three thugs.
The lad's brown hair was slightly curly, and his face bore prominent creases. He strode up to the weeping Ethans, crouched down, and grinned.
"I'm Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob. From today onwards, I'll take care of you on Margot's behalf."
Charlie's excited expression froze.
Ethans's cries halted abruptly.
Slowly raising her tear-streaked face, she saw Wilson's smile and the shadow his body cast.
The shadow was so dense that it couldn't be dispelled.
Lumian observed quietly, his head imperceptibly raised.
...
On the way to the first floor, Charlie, who had been silent for a long time, couldn't help but ask, "Is there really no end to the suffering of the poor?"
"I like something Aurore Lee wrote," Lumian replied, his face expressionless. "Sometimes, we're not the ones at fault, but the world."
As soon as he finished speaking, three people stomped up from the first floor.
They were police officers in black uniforms, black vests, white shirts, and strapless leather boots.
The 1.85-meter-tall officer leading the group glanced at Charlie and Lumian and suddenly stopped in his tracks.
Pressing down on the gun at his waist, he asked in a deep voice, "Charlie Collent?"
Charlie was stunned.
"It's me, Officer. What's the matter?"
The officer gestured at his colleagues and took out steel handcuffs.
As his two colleagues encircled Charlie, he said with a serious expression, "You're suspected of murder. We're arresting you."
"Murder?" Charlie's face displayed shock, fear, and confusion.
Lumian raised his eyebrows in surprise.
As the officer handcuffed Charlie with his colleague's assistance, he informed him, "Madame Alice is dead!"

Chapter 134: Courtesan

"What?" Charlie's disbelief was palpable.

Lumian shared his surprise, casting a sympathetic glance at Charlie.

He was convinced that Charlie had no reason to kill Madame Alice. After all, while she lived, Charlie stood to gain 500 verl d'or a month for the next six months. According to various publications, this sum was nearly equivalent to the monthly salary of a doctor, lawyer, mid-level civil servant, senior high school teacher, senior engineer, or deputy police lieutenant. For someone who had nearly starved to death and could only find work as an apprentice attendant, it was a small fortune.

As his two colleagues headed upstairs, the officer who had handcuffed Charlie tersely explained,

"Madame Alice was discovered dead in her room at the Hôtel du Cygne Blanc this morning. Multiple witnesses confirm you spent the night there and didn't leave until close to midnight."

Charlie's fear and confusion mounted.

"How is this possible? How did she die..."

Muttering to himself, he suddenly turned to the officer, anxiety etched on his face, and insisted, "She was alive when I left! I swear by Saint Vième!"

The officer's deep voice responded, "The preliminary autopsy report places Madame Alice's time of death between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. last night. Besides you and her, no one else's presence was detected."

Could the other presence not be human? Lumian mused silently, considering the Montsouris ghost.

If it weren't for his lack of an adequate disguise and his desire to avoid the detectives' scrutiny, he would have voiced his thoughts.

"Impossible! This can't be happening!" Charlie's eyes widened, his voice raised in protest.

A police officer, who had slipped away earlier, descended from the fourth floor, a glittering diamond necklace held in his white-gloved left hand.

"Found this!" he informed the lead officer.

The officer nodded without further explanation to Charlie. He stared at him solemnly, declaring, "Charlie Collent, you're under arrest for murder. You have the right to remain silent; anything you say can and will be used against you in court."

"I didn't do it! Do you hear me? I didn't!" Charlie screamed, struggling futilely.

Despite his protestations, he was led out of Auberge du Coq Doré by

the two police officers.
By then, several tenants had been drawn by the commotion to the staircase, where they watched the scene unfold.
Among them was Gabriel, who appeared to have just completed an all-night writing session on his manuscript.
"Do you think Charlie did it?" Lumian asked the playwright, deep in thought as he stared down the now-empty corridor.
Gabriel had emerged earlier and had a rough understanding of Charlie's predicament.
He shook his head, replying, "I don't think Charlie is guilty. He's not a saint, but he's not evil either."
"Why do you say that?" Lumian inquired, turning to him.
Gabriel adjusted his black-framed glasses.
"Charlie was swindled out of his money and nearly starved, yet he never considered stealing from us.
"That means he either has principles and a moral compass, or he's terrified of the law. In either case, it's enough to prove he wouldn't murder that lady."
Lumian nodded, then chuckled.
"People can be impulsive and change."
With that, he climbed the stairs to the fifth floor.
This was the top floor of Auberge du Coq Doré. Large sections of the ceiling overhead showed signs of water damage, as if heavy rain would cause it to leak.
Lumian approached Room 504, Charlie's room, and extracted a small wire he carried with him to unlock the wooden door.
Inside, Charlie's suitcase, bed, and wooden table had been rifled through by the two police officers earlier. Items were strewn about, but they were few and far between.
Lumian recalled that during a conversation with Charlie at the basement bar, he had mentioned pawning his only formal suit and many other belongings while unemployed. He still couldn't afford to retrieve them.
As he entered, his gaze shifted, and Lumian suddenly spotted a portrait.
Taped to the wall opposite the bed, it depicted a woman in a green dress.
The woman appeared to be in her late twenties, with auburn hair, jade-green eyes, and lustrous red lips. She possessed an exquisite beauty, radiating elegance.
Lumian was taken aback. The woman in the painting seemed eerily familiar.
He realized it must be Susanna Matisse, the infamous prostitute Charlie had confused for Saint Viève.

Yet he had never met this woman before, so there was no reason for him to find her familiar.
After some thought, Lumian suddenly remembered something.
During his Summoning Dance in Room 207, he had attracted a translucent figure that was clearly more powerful than the other entities.
The figure, too, was female and bore a striking resemblance to Susanna Matisse in the portrait. However, one had turquoise hair, the other auburn; one's hair was long enough to cover her naked body, while the other's was merely long enough to form a bun.
Moreover, the figure was even more alluring, seemingly capable of stirring hidden desires within anyone. Susanna Matisse's portrait didn't provoke such feelings in Lumian.
A consequence of misguided prayers? Lumian silently nodded in agreement.
In the past, he wouldn't have questioned Charlie's actions. If it meant avoiding starvation, Lumian would have prayed sincerely to a prostitute, let alone Trier's guardian angel.
But now, through Aurore's grimoire, Lumian had gained a basic understanding of the entry-level Sequences of the twenty-two divine paths, sacrificial taboos, and associated mystical knowledge. He knew that careless praying could be perilous.
After searching for a while, he left Room 504, grabbed the carbide lamp, and hailed a public carriage on Avenue du Marché, heading toward Quartier de l'Observatoire.
As he ventured into the underground toward the area where Osta Trul typically lurked, Lumian periodically scrutinized the shadows behind the stone pillars.
He laughed at himself, thinking, I won't run into the Montsouris ghost again, will I?
If that were the case, he would need to consider whether the Montsouris ghost had a particular connection to something he possessed, or if corruption had indirectly altered his "horoscope," resulting in exceptionally bad luck.
Fortunately, Lumian's concerns proved unfounded. He found Osta Trul sitting beneath a stone pillar, a bonfire crackling nearby.
The hooded, black-robed figure glanced at Lumian and offered a genuine smile.
"Mr. K has granted you permission to attend our biweekly mysticism gathering at nine o'clock on Wednesday night."
Osta's gaze bore a distinct sincerity, as if to say payment was due.
At 9 p.m. the day after tomorrow... Lumian nodded with a smile.
"Where's the gathering?"
"Meet me at my place an hour beforehand. I'll take you there," Osta

replied without hesitation.
Lumian tersely acknowledged.
"I'll pay you the rest then."
"Alright." Though Osta seemed slightly disappointed, he acquiesced.
Lumian inquired, "What should I be cautious of at the gathering?"
"Cover your face and hide your identity," Osta advised from experience. "You don't want other attendees exposing you if they're caught by the authorities, do you? Aside from Mr. K, no one should know everything."
Lumian grinned, retorting, "You've already seen my face and know my identity. Should I consider burying you in some corner of Underground Trier after the first gathering?"
Osta involuntarily shuddered and forced a smile.
"You're quite the joker. But I don't actually know who you are, where you live, or what you do. Besides, it's unlikely that you've shown me your true self."
Taking pleasure in unnerving the other party, Lumian found a rock and sat down. Basking in the warmth of the bonfire, he casually asked, "Have you ever heard of Susanna Matisse?"
"I have," Osta replied, his excitement evident. "For a time, she was the woman of my dreams. I bought numerous posters and postcards featuring her image. A few years ago, she was Trier's most famous prostitute, the kind who attended high society banquets. She was linked to countless scandals involving members of parliament, high-ranking officials, and the wealthy. Rumor has it that she made hundreds of thousands of verl d'or annually, but she's been out of the limelight for the past two or three years. Nana has since taken her place as Trier's renowned courtesan. Sigh, she might have become someone's permanent mistress."
Hundreds of thousands of verl d'or? Lumian was taken aback.
"A high-level courtesan earns more than most best-selling authors?"
"Isn't that normal?" Osta wore a peculiar expression. "A high-level courtesan can sleep with members of parliament, bankers, and high-ranking officials, but a best-selling author can't[1]."
Amused and self-deprecating, Lumian remarked, "That's true. Poet Boller once said there is no difference between a poet and prostitute. The former sells the product of his imagination, the latter her body."
"I prefer bodies," Osta admitted candidly.
Lumian inquired again, "Have you heard of the legend of a female ghost? She has turquoise hair, long enough to wrap around her body. Her features are exquisite, capable of enchanting most men and arousing their desires."

"No." Osta shook his head.
With a wistful expression, he added, "If such a female ghost truly exists, I'd love to encounter her just once."
Lumian stood up and chuckled.
"Then brace yourself for sudden death after doing it dozens of times a night."
"..." Osta's expression froze.
...
3 p.m., 27 Avenue du Marché, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman Police Headquarters.
Lumian, having spent nearly 300 verl d'or on three sets of differently graded clothes, affordable cosmetics, and other disguise props, entered the unusually noisy hall.
Some people were being brought in, others were fortunate enough to leave, while still others argued loudly, caused a scene, and cursed—some slammed tables and kicked stools...
Lumian, his blond hair neatly combed back, black-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, and a mustache adorning his lips, appeared with overly fair cheeks. Dressed in a black formal suit and carrying a brown briefcase, he approached a male constable overseeing reception.
He stopped before the man, lifted his head slightly, and confidently announced, "I'm Charlie Collent's pro bono lawyer. I'd like to see my client."

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1. I remember Baudelaire mentioning it, but I couldn't find the source for the time being. It could be someone else. ↩

Chapter 135: Confirming the Situation

The constable set down his newspaper and sized up Lumian, visibly unnerved by his unabashed confidence. He gestured to the notebook and fountain pen before him, saying, "Show me your lawyer's license and register your name and purpose of visit."

A license? Seriously? Lumian, the phony attorney, felt a surge of panic.

Hadn't he read in countless novels and newspapers that simply identifying oneself as a lawyer was enough to gain access to a client?

As Lumian reached for the black fountain pen, his mind raced, formulating a plan.

He suddenly noticed that the constable across from him had shifted his attention to the recently discarded copy of Youth of Trier, fixated on the annual Trier cycling race.

He doesn't seem to care about the lawyer's license... An idea flashed through Lumian's mind. Mimicking Aurore's penmanship, he scrawled his 'name': "Guillaume Pierre, pro bono lawyer. Meeting client, Charlie Collent."

After jotting it down, Lumian stood and nonchalantly glanced around.

Feigning delight, he raised his arm and exclaimed, "My little cabbage, long time no see!"

Confused faces turned in his direction. Lumian spun back to the registering constable and murmured, "I spotted a friend."

The unspoken message: he'd present his lawyer's license later.

Without waiting for a reply, Lumian strode to a corner of the hall.

The constable gave the register a cursory glance before returning his gaze to Youth of Trier.

Once in the corner, Lumian stole a peek at the preoccupied constable, then turned to the baffled onlookers with an apologetic grin.

"I'm sorry, I mistook you for someone else."

Clutching his briefcase, he approached the police officer he had "chosen" earlier, who was now coming from the registration office.

Lumian lifted his chin and demanded haughtily, "I want to see my client, Charlie Collent."

In the Intis Republic, attorneys held a far higher social status than ordinary constables.

The officer glanced back at the registration office, saw no cause for concern, and nodded.

"I'll contact the person in charge of that case for you."

Fifteen minutes later, Lumian found himself face-to-face with

Charlie in a secured room, two officers standing guard at the door.
"Who are you?" Charlie asked, sinking into a chair across the table, his eyes filled with confusion.
His once-rosy cheeks were now pallid, fear etched into every line of his face.
He had heard of pro bono lawyers while chatting with other hotel staff and knew they were provided by government agencies or philanthropic organizations for destitute suspects. He never expected one to arrive just half a day after his arrest.
Were those fake-collar-wearing bureaucrats that efficient?
Lumian grinned, removed his black-framed glasses, winked with his right eye, and spoke in his natural voice, "Don't you recognize me? I'm your pro bono lawyer."
Charlie stared, dumbstruck. After a few seconds of careful scrutiny, a spark of recognition lit up his face.
But before he could speak, Lumian slipped his glasses back on and said, "Quiet. Listen to me."
"Alright, alright." Charlie snapped to attention.
Lumian's smile vanished, replaced by a grave expression.
"I need to know the full details of what happened. That's the only way I can clear your name."
"Really?" Charlie asked, desperation in his voice, like a drowning man grasping at a lifeline.
Feigning his professionalism, Lumian questioned, "What time did you stay in the room with Mrs. Alice until?"
Charlie rubbed his face, struggling to recall through the haze of confusion and pain, "Madame Alice ordered room service. I entered her room before 8 p.m. and stayed until she was tired. I only left at midnight. At that time, she had just laid down and was still awake. She was still alive!"
From 8 p.m. to midnight? Every day? That 500 verl d'or isn't easy to earn... Lumian mused, then adopted a lawyerly tone, "You have to be honest with me. Hiding anything will only hurt you in the end."
"I'm not lying. That's really the truth!" Lumian's words, actions, posture, and tone had convinced Charlie that he was truly his defense attorney.
After verifying a few more details, Lumian inquired, "After you gained Madame Alice's favor, did anyone express jealousy?"
"Many. Apprentices and official attendants alike, they were all jealous of me..." Charlie remembered.
They discussed the topic for a while before Lumian produced a photo, handing it to Charlie.
"See if you recognize this person."
Charlie gasped, "Isn't this Saint Vième?"

Why was she dressed so provocatively, her chest exposed?
"I've confirmed that the portrait in your room isn't Saint Viève. It belongs to the famous courtesan, Susanna Mattise." Lumian tactfully replaced 'prostitute' with 'courtesan' to prevent Charlie from becoming overly upset.
"Huh?" Charlie's face contorted with confusion.
I prayed to a courtesan, not an angel?
But why did my luck change for the better?
No, if it had truly improved, I wouldn't have been arrested...
Lumian produced another photo. It still depicted Susanna Mattise, but he had already altered the courtesan's hair color and made a few "edits."
"Take a look at this and tell me if you recognize this person."
Charlie scrutinized the image for a few seconds before his expression morphed into one of shock.
"Wh— She! How can this be?"
"So you do know her?" Lumian smirked.
Charlie looked up, his voice hollow, "S-she is... She's the woman from my beautiful dreams.
"Didn't I tell you? I had these amazing dreams for a few days. I dreamed of making love to her. She was so passionate and gentle...
"H-how did you know I dreamed of her? I didn't tell anyone! Why do you have a photo of her?"
Charlie's gaze, now fixed on Lumian, had completely changed.
Is this really the southern kid I know?
Aside from his talent for pranks and good looks, there was nothing extraordinary about him!
Lumian's lips curled into a smile as he gazed back at Charlie.
"Take a closer look at who's in the photo."
Charlie stared blankly at the image of the green-haired woman.
As he examined it, his expression morphed into sheer terror. He recoiled involuntarily, making the chair creak.
"No, that's impossible! Susanna, Susanna, she's that prostitute!" Charlie shouted, unable to suppress his emotions.
This revelation left him feeling as if he had encountered a malevolent spirit.
After praying to a portrait of a prostitute, he had not only escaped hunger and found a new job but had also dreamed of her and slept with her!
Wasn't this akin to encountering a ghost?
Lumian nodded approvingly.
"Congratulations. At least you're not blind."
He had intended to help Charlie and divulge information as a prank to frighten him, but the two matters were unrelated.

The door to the interview room creaked open. A constable standing guard outside inquired warily, "What happened? Why are you shouting?"
"I helped him recall some key details," Lumian explained calmly.
Charlie snapped out of his stupor.
"Yes, I remember something very important."
And indeed, it was!
The policeman didn't press further and shut the door again.
Seeing this, Charlie leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table, and asked anxiously, "Did I encounter an evil female spirit?"
"It might not be a vengeful or evil spirit," Lumian said, watching Charlie's expression soften slightly before adding, "It might be even more troublesome than that."
At those words, Charlie's face turned ashen.
After a brief pause, he asked apprehensively, "You... you mean Madame Alice was killed by that evil spirit?"
"I'm not sure yet." Lumian stood up. "I need to examine Madame Alice's corpse."
"You even know how to investigate a corpse to determine the true cause of death?" Charlie found his neighbor increasingly enigmatic.
Lumian smiled but offered no answer.
As Charlie's defense attorney, Lumian had the right to inspect the corpse under police supervision, and he could even enlist the assistance of an independent pathologist. So, after signing two documents under the name Guillaume Pierre, Lumian was escorted to the basement of the market district's police headquarters and into the morgue where the body was kept.
The officer leading him slid open the cabinet, unzipped the body bag, and pointed to the female corpse.
"This is Madame Alice."
In life, Alice had preserved her appearance quite well, with only faint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Her thick brown eyebrows framed her face, her cheeks sagged slightly, and her skin had taken on a deathly pallor.
Lumian glanced casually at the body and said to the officer, "I'm good."
He wasn't a pathologist who had come to conduct a genuine examination; his objective was merely to pinpoint the approximate location of Madame Alice's remains.
After exiting the morgue, Lumian turned to the accompanying officer and asked, "Where's the nearest restroom?"
"Take a right at the end of the corridor," replied the officer, despite his growing impatience.

Lumian hastened his steps and entered the basement restroom.
Once inside, he locked the wooden door and performed the Summoning Dance in the cramped space.
Amidst the frenzied, contorted dance, a chilling wind swept through the restroom. Vague figures materialized one by one, their pale or bluish-white faces staring at Lumian with empty eyes.
These were the lingering obsessions of the departed.
Lumian had never witnessed such a spectacular sight before. For a moment, he felt as if he were surrounded by ghostly specters.
He steadied himself and continued the second half of the dance while searching for Madame Alice.
Soon, he spotted the fierce-looking lady with the thick brown eyebrows.
Lumian unsheathed the ritual silver dagger and inflicted a wound, commanding Madame Alice to attach herself to him.
Madame Alice consumed the drop of blood and entered Lumian's body.
Immediately, Lumian felt a shiver race down his spine, and his chest grew heavy.
His breath came in labored gasps.
Without hesitation, Lumian amplified Madame Alice's obsession, foregoing any selection of her characteristics or abilities.
Almost instantaneously, Lumian's vision dimmed, and he saw Madame Alice lying on the bed, her mouth and nose smothered by a down pillow. However, there was no one pressing down on the pillow in her line of sight!

Chapter 136: Initial Summoning Attempt

Lumian, consumed by Madame Alice's fixation, found breathing increasingly difficult. His body ached more intensely, as if he had once again encountered the Montsouris ghost and teetered on the brink of death.

This was a true death experience.

Concerned he might lose control, Lumian chose not to push further. He ordered Madame Alice's lingering spirit to vacate his body.

Gasping for air, he wiped the cold sweat from his brow before reverting to his slightly arrogant novice lawyer persona.

Accompanied by the police officer, he headed back to the interview room.

Charlie sprang to his feet, leaning forward with his hand braced against the table. His face was a mix of anxiety and anticipation.

Without waiting for a question, Lumian seemed to hear Charlie ask, "What's the result?"

Lumian nodded and made a calming motion.

His gesture implied that the autopsy findings aligned with his expectations.

Relief washed over Charlie's face instantly. It was as though he'd expended all his energy in that moment. He slumped back into his chair, physically drained.

In front of the two constables at the door, Lumian declared firmly, "Don't worry about anything else. I've got it covered.

"You only need to do one thing. During the next questioning, recount the entire story to these gentlemen without omitting a single detail, no matter how absurd or implausible it may seem.

"Of course, stick to what happened up until your arrest. There's no need to delve into our conversation."

Since a lawyer-client dialogue might involve courtroom tactics others had no right to know, the two officers at the door didn't find Lumian's last statement odd. After all, Charlie Collent was an unfortunate kid facing a serious criminal case for the first time and requiring a lawyer. He likely didn't know the rules and needed explicit guidance.

Charlie grasped Lumian's message: Don't reveal to the police that I discovered the issue with the portrait!

"Alright." Charlie wasn't as angry, terrified, or flustered as when he was first arrested and brought to the station, but he wasn't as chatty as usual either.

After departing the market district's police headquarters, Lumian circled twice before finding an alley blocked by a barricade. He

changed his clothes, removed his glasses, and altered his makeup style.
Now that I have enough money, I can set up a safe house and a place to switch disguises based on Aurore's novels. Lumian recalled his sister's writing, piecing together the method for handling such matters.
He also fully intended to purchase a copy of Men's Aesthetics.
Mastering makeup without guidance was impossible. He'd mainly relied on his hairstyle, glasses, and attire to conceal his identity.
En route to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian contemplated how to extricate Charlie from his dire situation.
Who exactly is Susanna Matisse, or rather, the bizarre creature she morphed into? *Why did she murder Madame Alice?*
Why did she help Charlie in the past and engage in the act with him in the dream?
Should I pen a letter to Madam Magician, inquiring about the nature of the creature and its peculiarities? Only by truly understanding Susanna Matisse can I devise a strategy to handle her. Otherwise, she's evidently more powerful than me...
The prospect of writing to Madam Magician unsettled Lumian.
Judging by the speed of her previous response and its content, he sensed her indirectness: "Don't bother me unless it's important!"
If Lumian faced an issue involving Susanna Matisse, writing to inquire would be acceptable. However, this predicament only concerned his neighbor.
It was highly likely that the enigmatic, potent woman who detested complications wouldn't respond.
And this could impact her attitude towards Lumian.
If I'm not asking Madam Magician, why not inquire at Mr. K's mysticism gathering? If the attendees are Beyonders at Osta Trul's level, they might not have the answer... As Lumian mulled it over, he ascended the stairs and entered his room.
His gaze fell on the suitcase containing Aurore's grimoires, and he experienced a sudden revelation.
Why should I investigate Susanna Matisse and deal with her personally?
My sole objective is to rescue Charlie!
Even if I can uncover Susanna Matisse's vulnerability and vanquish her, can I coerce a peculiar creature like her to turn herself in at the police station?
If she dares to go, the police won't dare to entertain her. Given her displayed characteristics, wouldn't she indulge in an orgy on the spot?
Lumian rapidly discerned the distinction between goals and

means.
There was no need for such effort to exonerate Charlie and secure his release from police headquarters!
He simply had to inform Bureau 8, the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery that Charlie's case involved Beyonder elements and prompt them to intervene in the investigation!
Even a low-level Beyonder with no intelligence network or mystical powers could detect something amiss with Susanna Matisse. There's no reason why official investigators couldn't uncover the invisible force behind Madame Alice's demise. Eventually, they would not only verify Charlie's innocence but also help him escape Susanna Matisse's grasp and resolve the issue with the strange creature entirely. Lumian had a clear conjecture about the subsequent events after the lunatic upstairs had sought refuge in the cathedral upon encountering the Montsouris ghost.
He had urged Charlie to divulge everything at the market district's police headquarters to attract the attention of official Beyonders.
Nevertheless, he felt compelled to act. He couldn't rely solely on ordinary police officers.
What if they deemed Charlie's story a fabrication intended to mock their intelligence and resorted to violence to coerce a confession on the spot?
Lumian's gaze swept over the crumpled newspaper on the wooden table, recalling how he or his sister had snipped out the livre bleu's words and pieced them together to compose a letter seeking assistance from the authorities.
Transform Charlie's experience into a letter and 'deliver' it to a nearby cathedral? Lumian nodded, deciding to execute the plan.
Armed with the plea for help and Charlie's confession, it should pique the interest of official Beyonders.
As he was about to search for appropriate phrases in Novel Weekly, Lumian suddenly frowned.
Could the officials link a similar request for help to Cordu? Would they associate me, a wanted criminal, with Charlie?
Lumian didn't know if Ryan and his associates had fully reported their findings to official Beyonders nationwide, but he was unwilling to take that risk.
Imitate Aurore's handwriting?
Unlike a lawyer's signature that doesn't raise suspicion, Ryan and his team suggested that the letter would likely undergo various checks, including divination...
Disguise myself and have someone else write it for me? As his thoughts raced, Lumian suddenly had an idea. I can summon a

spirit world creature to write it for me!
If the officials detect any issues, they won't be able to make the spirit world creature identify me since they don't know the summoning incantation!
The more Lumian considered it, the more he believed it was a solid plan. He pulled out a chair, sat down, and began devising the summoning incantation.
The first sentence was undoubtedly, "Spirit wandering in the void."
After some thought, Lumian penned the second sentence.
"The friendly creature that can be subordinated."
Summoned spirit world creatures had to be under Lumian's command to assist him in writing letters. Friendliness provided essential protection for the summoner.
As for the third sentence, Lumian didn't have lofty expectations. He merely needed to incorporate the two aspects of being weak and proficient in Intisian.
After several moments of mental permutation, the third sentence materialized on paper:
"Weakling proficient in Intisian."
Phew... After writing, Lumian exhaled.
He then leafed through Aurore's grimoire and translated the few unmastered words into Hermes.
Immediately after, he set up the altar and commenced the summoning.
Soon, he completed the ritual and observed the candle flame turning a dark green hue and expanding to the size of a human head.
A hazy, translucent figure materialized, its head resembling an ox's and the rest, a dog's.
"Help me write a letter," Lumian said in Hermes as he gazed at the spirit world creature.
The bewildered ox-headed dog didn't respond.
"I order you to help me write a letter," Lumian emphasized in Hermes.
The ox-headed dog appeared dumbstruck, as though it didn't comprehend.
Lumian made several more attempts, but the ox-headed dog remained unresponsive.
Having no other choice, he terminated the summoning early to preserve his spirituality.
He started pondering the issue.
I can't communicate with that guy...
Amenable to subordination doesn't mean it can be communicated with...

With this realization, Lumian modified the second summoning incantation to "A friendly creature that can be communicated with."
Being able to communicate meant being able to make requests!
This time, a colossal "snail" emerged from the dark green flames.
"Hello." Lumian attempted to greet it in Intisian.
The snail emitted an ethereal voice.
"Hello, what's the matter?"
It also spoke Intisian.
"Can you help me write a letter?" Lumian was overjoyed.
The "snail" replied in a troubled tone, "But I don't have any hands."
"..." Lumian had no choice but to end the summoning.
After some consideration, he changed the phrase "weakling proficient in Intisian" to "weakling who can write Intisian."
"Can write" covered both the knowledge and necessary physical requirements.
Before long, Lumian completed his third summoning.
He saw a transparent creature resembling a rabbit.
"Can you help me write a letter?" Lumian asked with intense anticipation.
The "rabbit" nodded, picked up the pen on the table, and wrote an Intisian word on the paper.
"A letter."
"..." Lumian's lips twitched.
This creature didn't seem too bright.
With resolve, Lumian grabbed a pen and paper and scribbled a plea for help, including Susanna Mattise's portrait, details about the wet dream, Madame Alice's death, and Charlie's arrest.
Then, he said to the "rabbit," "Copy it!"
The "rabbit" took the fountain pen and diligently transcribed it.
Soon, it finished its task.
Lumian examined it and nodded in satisfaction.
In the next second, his smile froze.
Not only had the dimwit copied the entire contents of the letter, but it had also replicated his handwriting.
In other words, it was in Lumian's script!
Lumian took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. He pointed at Novel Weekly and said, "Copy in that font."
The "rabbit" nodded slowly and rewrote without complaint.
A few minutes later, Lumian received a seemingly printed plea for help.

Chapter 137: Hooha

Lumian examined the letter with gloved hands and breathed a sigh of relief.

No issues this time!

Completing three consecutive spirit world creature summoning rituals had left him feeling drained.

After a moment's consideration, Lumian asked the rabbit-like spirit world creature, "Can you do me another favor?"

The "rabbit" thought seriously for a few seconds before giving a slow nod.

Lumian unzipped his grayish-blue work uniform.

"Then follow me first."

The ethereal and transparent "rabbit" leaped from midair to Lumian's side, assuming the role of a loyal companion.

Lumian sighed quietly and said, "What I mean is, you can hide inside my clothes to avoid detection by any Beyonder with heightened spiritual perception."

The "rabbit" wore a blank expression as it hopped into Lumian's clothes and curled up.

Since it had no true mass or weight, his clothes could be zipped up quickly without leaving a trace.

After stowing the letter in the same pocket, Lumian dissolved the spiritual barrier, removed his gloves, and exited Room 207.

He meandered toward Avenue du Marché, nearing the Suhit steam locomotive station.

It was just past five o'clock, and many people were still at work. The street was neither crowded nor deserted. Groups of passersby headed for the public carriage station sign or searched for the subway entrance. They carried their luggage and walked on foot to nearby streets in search of temporary accommodations for the night.

Lumian patted his right pocket and pointed at the postbox several dozen meters away. Lowering his voice, he said, "See that green metal cylinder?"

He felt a vibration in his pocket. The "rabbit" had responded in kind.

Lumian exhaled in relief and instructed, "Place the letter beside you in that metal cylinder."

Having said that, Lumian massaged his temples and activated his Spirit Vision.

He watched the "rabbit" emerge, enveloping the plea for help. It maneuvered through the crowd and reached the green metal cylinder.

Just as Lumian thought the "rabbit" would deposit the letter in the postbox and successfully complete the mission, the creature entered the postbox with the letter.
Moments later, it exited the postbox and flew back to Lumian, leaving the letter inside.
Lumian closed his eyes and consoled himself, I suppose it's considered tossed in...
He then left Avenue du Marché with the "rabbit" and located a vacant alley. In Hermes language, he informed the "rabbit" that the summoning was over.
The little creature continuously drained his spiritual energy.
After the "rabbit" returned to the spirit world, Lumian finally felt at ease.
He resolved to stop aiding Charlie. The rest would hinge on how the official Beyonders handled the situation.
If it weren't for the fact that this matter is intriguing enough, I wouldn't have bothered to help him. Do I have to battle that enigmatic creature, Susanna Mattise, who's clearly formidable, on his behalf? Lumian mused silently.
He chuckled.
In Cordu, if those crude fellows understood the traits Susanna Mattise exhibited, they would undoubtedly ask slyly whether he wanted to fight her in bed or in the hayloft.
Of course, Lumian could be just as coarse when dealing with them.
On his way back to Rue Anarchie, he discovered a meat patty shop and purchased Red Snapper Hot Beef Meatloaf for dinner.
Paired with the soda sold by street vendors, Lumian navigated the crowd as he ate, occasionally evading hands that covertly reached for his wallet.
Compared to Rouen Meatloaf, Red Snapper Hot Beef Meatloaf was less greasy. The fish was refreshing and delicate, the beef savory and crispy, the dough's subtle sweetness had a bite, and the aroma of spices and fat ignited Lumian's taste buds one by one with a rich texture.
After eating and drinking his fill, he clutched the glass bottle that still contained a third of the pale-red liquid and sighed appreciatively.
No wonder the Trieriens love meatloaves...
When I get the chance, I'll visit Rue Richelieu in the library district and try the first restaurant that created Red Snapper Hot Beef Meatloaf...
Based on the newspapers and magazines he had perused before, he could recite several famous meatloaves off the top of his head.
Degan Meatloaf, Périgueux Meatloaf, Tudenan Cashew Pie, Minced

Meat Pie...
Sipping the pomegranate-flavored soda, Lumian turned onto Rue Anarchie.
What met his gaze was a chaotic tableau. The suspected gangsters brandished either axes or clubs, squaring off in the street.
Pedestrians steered clear, and the vendors retreated from Rue Anarchie one by one. The residents of the houses on both sides slammed their windows shut.
Lumian didn't venture further. He backtracked a few steps and found a wall pillar to conceal himself behind as he observed the unfolding scene with interest.
He suspected that his assassination of the Poison Spur Mob's Margot had aroused the suspicions of several gangs in the market district, ultimately escalating into a standoff.
After waiting nearly 15 minutes, Lumian still didn't witness the mobsters erupt into full-scale combat.
His anticipation for the confrontation left him disappointed. He cursed under his breath, "Are you guys going to do this or not? You're blocking the street without fighting. Do you think you have too much time on your hands?"
With that in mind, Lumian glanced at the five-story grayish-white building beside him.
He seriously contemplated finding a room and hurling the empty soda bottle between the two factions, tricking them into believing the opposing mob leader had signaled the start of the battle.
That way, Lumian would have a spectacle to enjoy.
Just as he was about to put his plan into action, a large contingent of police officers in black uniforms appeared at both ends of Rue Anarchie.
Leading them were officers on tall brown or black horses, brandishing shields and clubs. They advanced towards the mobsters, step by step,
exuding an immense pressure that caused many of the gangsters to waver.
When the mounted police charged, the mobsters gathered on Rue Anarchie dispersed. Some fled, while others were beaten to the ground.
Lumian couldn't help but want to applaud. His thirst for excitement was thoroughly quenched.
He had only read about such scenes in novels and news articles, the latter of which often glossed over the gritty details!
In no time, Rue Anarchie returned to its usual cacophony.
Lumian finished his last sip of pomegranate soda and sauntered back to Auberge du Coq Doré, entering Room 207.

Sitting by the bed, he replayed the entire process of writing and posting the letter in his mind to ensure he hadn't overlooked any details that could expose him to the official Beyonders.
After a while, Lumian sighed softly.
"If only I had a messenger. It wouldn't have been so troublesome."
Unfortunately, obtaining a messenger wasn't easy. Even his sister Aurore didn't have one.
To date, Lumian knew of only two people who possessed a messenger.
One was Madam Magician, and the other was the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president, Hela, whom Aurore had mentioned.
Hela... Lumian's expression gradually darkened.
If the Aurore in his dream indeed bore some influence from her soul fragment, it was apparent that Aurore trusted the vice president a great deal. Her first move upon encountering a problem was to summon the other party's messenger for assistance.
I wonder if Hela knows Aurore's true identity, or if she discovered through that... that obituary that Aurore has... has already passed on... Lumian muttered to himself.
As he pondered, an idea struck him.
It was actually possible for him to summon Hela's messenger!
The summoning incantation comprised only three sentences. Lumian was certain the last phrase was "a messenger that belongs to Hela." The first two sentences followed a fixed format and requirements. As long as he attempted a few more combinations, he'd find the correct sequence!
Moreover, under such circumstances, Lumian wouldn't face any danger even if the initial combinations were incorrect. This was because the description of a messenger belonging to Hela eliminated other possibilities.
In other words, he'd either fail to summon it or successfully summon Hela's messenger.
Should I write a letter to Hela and inform her of what happened to Aurore? Lumian found himself momentarily stumped.
Considering that his sister had mentioned "my notebook" when she pushed him away, and that much of the mystical knowledge in her notebook originated from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian quickly made up his mind. If he could establish a connection with this organization, it would aid him in uncovering the crucial information hidden within the Warlock notebook.
He resolved to summon Hela's messenger right away!

Although he still harbored doubts about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president, he didn't believe he possessed any value she coveted. Besides, Aurore had trusted Hela while she was alive.
Lumian walked to the wooden table, sat down, and began writing.
"Honorable Madam Hela,
"I apologize for writing you this letter. I am Muggle's younger brother. I regret to inform you that she encountered misfortune and has passed away.
"This involves a catastrophe brought about by worshiping an evil god. Only a few people and I escaped.
"I'm not sure if this matter interests you, so I won't elaborate. I don't wish to waste your time.
"What I want to know is, did Muggle mention anything suspicious to you in the past year?
"..."
After staring at the letter for a few seconds, Lumian slowly exhaled and folded the paper.
He then cleaned the room, set up the altar again, and attempted the first combination.
"The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, a friendly creature that can be subordinated, a messenger that belongs solely to Hela."
After reciting the incantation, Lumian gazed at the dark-green candle flame and patiently awaited the messenger's arrival.
Time ticked by, but nothing happened on the altar.
Undeterred, Lumian spoke again, "I! I summon in my name:
"The spirit wandering above the world;
"The friendly creature that can be subordinated;
"A messenger that belongs solely to Hela..."
The dark green candle flame suddenly flickered and grew larger.
At that moment, not only did the area above remain unlit, but it also grew darker.
In the darkness, a shape quickly materialized.
It was a human-like skull, seemingly forged from pure silver. It emitted a gentle light that dispelled the encroaching darkness.
Pale-white flames burned in the skull's eye sockets, instilling a sense of danger in Lumian.
After staring at Lumian for a few seconds, the pure silver skull opened its mouth and bit down on the airborne letter.
Then, it retreated back into the reassembled darkness.

Chapter 138: Letter

Lumian completed the ritual on his second attempt. He cleared the wooden table and opened Aurore's grimoire. Under the glow of the carbide lamp, he thumbed through the relevant sections.

In under fifteen minutes, he sensed something. He looked up and fixed his gaze on a spot near the window.

A folded letter lay there, undisturbed.

That fast? Lumian, surprised, reached out and took the letter.

Hela's response, vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, had arrived sooner than expected.

Lumian unfolded the letter and skimmed the elegantly written words.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Ever since Muggle missed last month's gathering, I've had a bad feeling.

"There are too many dangers in this world. Sometimes, we can't avoid them just because we want to unless we can control everyone around us.

"If you wish, you can tell me about Muggle's misfortune. You don't have to go into great detail. Just tell me the general situation...

"From the fact that you can summon my messenger, you should have stepped onto the Beyonder path. I'm not sure if your sister told you that this means you'll always be accompanied by danger and madness, but I have to remind you that restraint and caution are our best friends.

"In the future, if you have any questions about mysticism, you can ask me by writing to me. Although I'm not one of those with vast knowledge, I can answer many questions.

"I've only met Muggle twice in the past year, mainly discussing various matters in the Beyonder domain. What left a deep impression on me was that she mentioned that a friend of hers was affected by a strange dream, hoping to find a solution. If necessary, she wanted to hire a real psychiatrist to treat him..."

Lumian silently read Hela's reply, his face twisting with emotion.

Aurore had been searching for a solution to his bizarre dream!

Lumian composed himself and contemplated his response.

Suddenly, he froze.

His brows furrowed as he muttered, "Aurore told Hela about hiring a real psychiatrist...

"Considering Madame Susie's description, a true psychiatrist must refer to a specific Sequence of the Spectator pathway...

"Only Beyonders skilled in this domain can prevent me from dreaming of the world shrouded in gray fog..."

The issue wasn't with the situation. The problem was:

Aurore's grimoire only had Sequence 9 Spectator recorded for the pathway!
Yet, she clearly knew about Psychiatrist!
Lumian quickly recalled the two conversations in his dream.
First, Aurore had said she wanted to find a genuine Hypnotist for him.
Second, Aurore had mentioned that she knew Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 of all pathways and had a certain understanding of them.
Psychiatrist is often associated with hypnosis. Hypnotist is most likely a Sequence of the Spectator pathway as well, perhaps even superior to Psychiatrist...
Aurore's grimoire doesn't have records of the corresponding Sequence 8 or Sequence 7 of the Spectator pathway... Lumian's expression became grave, intermingled with a twisted thrill.
After so many days, he had finally discovered a discrepancy in Aurore's grimoire!
Previously, he had his suspicions but wasn't certain if there was any hidden anomaly. After all, Aurore in his dream was a figure formed from his memories and impressions under the influence of the soul fragment. Everything she said might not be accurate or complete. It was normal for her not to mention any exceptions explicitly.
Now, Hela's response indirectly confirmed that Aurore truly knew about one or more Sequences within the Spectator pathway and possessed a certain grasp of their related abilities.
Why hadn't Aurore recorded this knowledge in her grimoire? *What was the secret behind this inconsistency?* Lumian pulled out a blank sheet of paper, his emotions a blend of grief and anticipation.
In under a minute, he wrote, "Honorable Madam Hela,
"The truth is...
"My memory of the actual events is fragmented due to the calamity.
"If you could assist me in locating Guillaume Bénet, Pualis de Roquefort, and others, I would be deeply grateful. Their appearances and attributes can be found on the authorities' wanted posters.
"Lastly, I'm curious about the real psychiatrist Muggle intended to hire."
In his letter, Lumian briefly touched upon Cordu. He made no mention of the dream, the loop, or his rescue. He only speculated that Padre Guillaume Bénet, under someone's guidance, had worshipped an evil god and banished Madame Pualis, who

followed another sinister deity. Bénet then attempted a ritual with the entire village as a sacrifice. At the crucial moment, Muggle, selected as a vessel, pushed Lumian away, an essential sacrifice, causing the ritual's failure and Cordu's destruction. Finally, the official Beyonders, who had been called for aid, cleaned up the mess.

Lumian reassembled the altar, summoned the silver skull, and handed it the letter.

In less than fifteen minutes, he received a second reply from Hela.

Rather than comparing response speeds between Madam Magician and Madame Hela, Lumian eagerly read the letter's contents.

"I can sense your sorrow and understand your desire to uncover the truth and exact vengeance upon the perpetrator.

"As Muggle's friend, I'll aid you to the best of my ability, including but not limited to locating those individuals.

"I can also offer you a fresh lead on this matter. To my knowledge, Muggle's parents and other family members may still be alive in this world. She had distanced herself from them for some reason and didn't dare return to Trier. I'm unsure if they're in any danger or if they've come into contact with the evil god's followers.

"I don't know which Psychiatrist Muggle sought. Our organization has numerous genuine Psychiatrists, and many gatherings Muggle and I attended don't overlap. I'll assist you by inquiring with members who have interacted with her to see if you can obtain the answer you seek...

"Until this investigation is complete, I'll help conceal the fact that Muggle is deceased...

"If you relocate in the future, remember to summon my messenger again to prevent me from losing contact with you after obtaining pertinent information..."

After reading, Lumian fell silent for a long while before exhaling slowly.

Initially, he'd imagined Madame Hela would invite him to join the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, taking Aurore's place. In doing so, he could more effectively investigate the Psychiatrist Aurore sought to hire. However, it seemed the organization was highly cautious about recruiting new members. They might even need to meet specific criteria to be considered candidates. For instance, Aurore had mentioned that none of them could return to their hometowns.

Maybe Madame Hela is observing and testing me... Lumian reassured himself and resumed studying Aurore's grimoire.

As for Aurore's original family, he was at a loss for where to begin.

...
Wednesday, 7:50 p.m., 20 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Lumian rapped on Osta Trul's door, dressed in a grayish-blue worker's uniform and a dark-blue, almost black cap.
Osta, clad in black robes and a hood, opened the wooden door and glanced around. He grinned and remarked, "You're more punctual than I anticipated."
"I honor my promises better than you might think." Lumian strode into the room and handed Osta banknotes and coins worth 80 verl d'or.
Osta accepted it, counting twice with an even broader smile.
As he guided Lumian downstairs, he rambled, "The market district's been somewhat chaotic lately. Baron Brignais didn't even come to me for money."
"A gang leader died," Lumian commented nonchalantly.
Realizing the connection, Osta said regretfully, "Why couldn't Baron Brignais have died?"
"Even if Baron Brignais were dead, there'd still be Baron Guillaume and Baron Pierre. As long as the Savoie Mob exists, you'd have to repay the loan you owe," Lumian taunted.
Osta's expression soured.
Before long, he and Lumian boarded a public carriage. They each paid 30 coppet and found seats.
In about an hour, the carriage arrived at Avenue du Boulevard on the Srenzo River's north bank, Quartier 8, from the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman on the river's south bank.
This was the heart of the entire Intis Republic. The presidential Pavilion of Pleasure, the Grand Palace where Emperor Roselle once resided, and various newspaper headquarters were all here, encircled by upscale residences.
Lumian had previously read in newspapers that the average rent in this district was 4,000 verl d'or annually, roughly 74 verl d'or weekly. The priciest ones could even reach tens of thousands.
Noticing the empty carriage, Lumian lowered his voice and inquired of Osta, "Is Mr. K hosting a gathering on Avenue du Boulevard?"
Osta smirked and replied, "Always. Psychic and Arcane have their headquarters on Avenue du Boulevard as well."
You guys sure know how to hide... Lumian gazed at the broad, flat avenue outside the window, the orderly Intis parasol trees lining the street, and the elegant, light-colored buildings behind them.
Just before 8:50 p.m., Osta led Lumian into the six-story beige luxury house at 19 Rue Scheer.
"This is Psychic magazine's headquarters, but they only occupy the

top three floors." Osta didn't ascend the stairs but turned right into a corridor on the ground floor.
Only then did he inform Lumian, "Mr. K wants to see you beforehand."
"Alright." Lumian dipped his head and adjusted his hat, seemingly preoccupied with something.
Osta produced an iron-colored mask and grinned.
"It's time to disguise yourself. You can't let everyone see your true appearance."
In the next instant, Lumian looked up.
His face was shrouded in layers of white bandages, leaving only his eyes, nostrils, and ears exposed.
Upon seeing this, Osta's heart nearly skipped a beat.

Chapter 139: Mr. K

Within moments, Osta, who had been on the verge of a complaint, managed to force a smile and said, "You're quite the menacing sight like this."

"It's a classic look in literature," Lumian replied with a deliberately smug tone.

Osta said nothing, opting instead to don his iron mask, concealing his expression.

Taking a few steps forward, he halted and rapped on the door to the right.

Two long pauses, one short pause, and one long pause... Lumian watched Osta Trul's actions with the keen eye of a Hunter.

Within seconds, the dark-red wooden door creaked open.

The first thing Lumian saw was a plush, pale-yellow carpet, followed by classical-styled tables, chairs, sofas, and display shelves.

A figure stood in the shadows cast by gas wall lamps near the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Like Osta Trul, he wore the black robe of an ancient warlock, complete with a large hood. Lumian couldn't help but think, Can you even see the person standing in front of you clearly when you're dressed like this?

"Mr. K, Ciel has arrived," Osta announced respectfully to the nearly six-foot-tall figure as he stepped inside.

Lumian followed closely.

With a clang, the door shut behind him.

Mr. K turned to face Lumian. "Why do you want to attend our gathering?"

His voice was low and gravelly.

"For potion formulas, Beyonder characteristics, mystical items, and mysticism knowledge. It's not like it's for love or faith, right?" Lumian replied with intentional cynicism.

He then chuckled.

"I know that's not what you want to hear, but it doesn't matter. I don't mind telling you about me."

Lumian's voice deepened.

"In a catastrophe brought on by Beyonder powers, I lost my entire family.

"Not only did it cause me immense pain, but it made me realize that those so-called orthodox gods can't save us!

"From that day on, I sought Beyonder power and a way to forget all pain. I wanted to become powerful enough. I wanted those who brought me misfortune to experience the same torture."

The hooded Mr. K seemed to stare at Lumian without interruption. As for Osta Trul, he was visibly shocked. Ciel's words revealed raw, unmasked pain. His desire for the Samaritan Women's Spring was genuine!

Once Lumian finished speaking, Mr. K nodded and said, "There are two rules for participating in our gathering:

"First, no matter what happens, you can't attack anyone directly at the gathering.

"Second, don't attempt to follow other participants."

Only these two? Lumian hadn't expected so few constraints.

He didn't need to think hard to spot several loopholes immediately.

Not attacking directly? Does that mean I can use Provoke to incite the other party to death?

Just because I don't attempt to follow doesn't mean I can't do anything else to the target...

Is selling fake ingredients, fake formulas, fake Beyonder characteristics, and fake mystical items also allowed?

Lumian suppressed his urge to retort and nodded.

"No problem."

As he responded, he felt Mr. K's gaze on him, scrutinizing every inch of his flesh and skin.

It made him feel like he was in the sights of a venomous snake.

After a few seconds, Mr. K continued, "If you prefer not to disclose what you have and what you're after, you can write down your desired transaction in advance, and my attendant will copy it onto a portable blackboard for all participants to see. If you don't think it matters, you can make your request on the spot.

"Likewise, at the gathering, you can complete transactions through my attendant or directly with the other party.

"Remember, transactions carry risks. I can't guarantee the authenticity of all items, materials, or information. Of course, you can opt to pay me to notarize them, effectively reducing the risk."

A Notary's power? Lumian recalled Aurore's grimoire.

This was Sequence 6 of the Sun pathway, and most Beyonders in this pathway belonged to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.

Given this, Lumian suspected Mr. K might not be a Notary, but rather possess a related mystical item.

Lumian quickly collected himself and asked Mr. K, "May I write down my requirements now?"

Mr. K nodded and gestured towards a desk on the right side of the room.

"Write them there. My attendant will collect them."

Lumian approached the brown desk, adorned with Psychic, Lotus, Arcane, and other magazines. He unfolded a fragrant letter and

picked up a dark-red fountain pen. After some thought, he wrote:
"1. I possess a damaged Beyonder weapon. Seeking someone capable of repairing it. Price negotiable.
"2. Buying information on a peculiar creature. This female-looking entity is suspected to be a Spirit Body. It has long turquoise hair that envelops its body and exudes an alluring aura. It can induce erotic dreams with itself as the central figure. Additional details unknown. Reward depends on the value of information provided, ranging from 10 to 100 verl d'or."
Lumian considered adding a third point about a Provoker's acting experience but decided against it after some thought.
He remembered Aurore mentioning acting techniques, the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation, and other mysticism knowledge in his nightmare. Such knowledge wasn't common among ordinary Beyonders. And he was currently impersonating a newcomer who had just entered the Beyonder world due to a disaster, seeking more knowledge and resources.
If he were to write the word "acting," Mr. K would surely grow suspicious.
Of course, Lumian didn't think of it as a pretense. He genuinely was a novice who had entered the Beyonder world following a disaster and sought more knowledge and resources. However, his involvement in the original disaster was quite high-level, allowing him to encounter powerful figures like Madam Magician. As a result, he possessed extensive high-end knowledge but lacked common sense, relying on Aurore's grimoire to fill the gaps.
Having set down the letter and pen, Lumian left with Osta and entered a room at the end of the corridor.
The room appeared to be a salon. Sofas, chairs, a round table, a coffee table, barstools, and other furnishings were arranged casually, creating a relaxed atmosphere.
Several gathering attendees had already arrived. Some wore black robes and hoods that nearly covered their faces. Others donned clown or devil makeup, while a few wore crude or intricate masks.
For a moment, Lumian felt as if he had entered a masquerade ball.
He and Osta Trul took separate seats after entering separately.
Lumian chose a barstool, almost tempted to order a glass of absinthe to complete the look.
Soon enough, Mr. K entered and settled into the armchair reserved for the organizer. His masked and gloved attendants brought in a portable blackboard filled with transaction requests.
The first thing Lumian noticed was a request for Beyonder characteristics.
"Warrior pathway Sequence 8 Pugilist Beyonder characteristic,

15,000 verl d'or. Negotiable."
A Sequence 8 Beyonder characteristic selling for 15,000 verl d'or or more? Lumian was initially stunned, then overwhelmed by heartache and regret, as if he longed to drink from the Fountain of Oblivion.
He had just killed Margot, a Sequence 8 Provoker of the Hunter pathway!
Playing it safe, Lumian hadn't harassed Margot until the Montsouris ghost attacked, leaving the battlefield early.
While he had gained over 1,000 verl d'or from Margot through the fate exchange, it paled in comparison to the worth of the Provoker Beyonder characteristics.
Moments later, Lumian barely pulled himself together.
His actions had been the best course. If he had continued to pester Margot, something might have gone awry or drawn the authorities' attention. While Margot would still be dead, he could have landed in another crisis.
Lumian then examined the other transaction details.
"One Elf's Dark Leaf, 180 verl d'or."
"Two pages of Emperor Roselle's original diary. 300 verl d'or."
"Sequence 6 Baron of Corruption potion formula, 65,000 verl d'or."
"..."
As Lumian scanned the list, he understood why his sister Aurore was so extravagant with her spending.
"Let's begin," Mr. K rasped, scanning the room.
His attendants read the entries aloud one by one. Some went unanswered, while others were discreetly finalized through the attendants.
Lumian observed quietly, intent on familiarizing himself with these situations and gathering intel.
As the gathering neared its end, the attendant by the portable blackboard finally announced Lumian's first request.
Silence ensued.
After more than ten seconds, a man lounging in a corner divan snickered.
"Most of those skilled in restoring mystical items and Beyonder weapons are found in the God of Steam and Machinery Church. Try looking there."
His face was smeared with oil paint, as if he were masquerading as a savage from the Southern Continent's forests.
Ignoring the unfunny remark, Mr. K's attendant relayed Lumian's second request.
The gathering's attendees exchanged bewildered glances, as if this strange creature was news to them.

Just a bunch of clueless Low-Sequence Beyonders... Lumian inwardly scoffed in disappointment.

Just then, the man who had joked earlier shared, "This brings something to mind. Heh heh, here's a freebie.

"Where the Srenzo River meets the Ryan River downstream, there's a town called Aunett. Many middle-class Trier folks enjoy sailing and swimming there.

"Early last year, or maybe earlier, three consecutive female deaths occurred. They died of weakness from overindulgence, with no known partners, secret or otherwise. Their only shared trait was telling friends about the vivid, alluring dreams they'd been having recently."

Chapter 140: Painting

The situation bears a resemblance to Charlie's case, but with a crucial difference: these victims are all women, while Charlie is a man...

Could it be that the strange entity believed to be Susanna Mattise isn't constrained by gender? Or is there another, male counterpart to the creature?

The latter seems more probable, given that all three victims in Aunett were female and no males had been targeted.

Yes, there are distinctions between the three women and Charlie. None of them had a partner, either openly or secretly, and Charlie had become Madame Alice's lover not long after invoking Susanna Mattise. If that hadn't happened, would he have met the same fate as the three victims, drained of life by overindulgence?

Had Madame Alice been a sacrificial substitute? Or had that been merely the beginning?

Lumian pieced together a theory based on the information provided by the man with the painted face.

He hoped the authorities would take this case seriously and not rest until Susanna Mattise had been utterly vanquished.

As for whether the authorities would suspect Beyonders hiding among Charlie's friends due to the letter, Lumian wasn't too concerned. He had intentionally obscured Charlie's information and circumstances in the letter, even inserting a small mistake in a seemingly insignificant detail. The writer appeared to harbor a deep grudge against Susanna Mattise, having tracked her for an extended period, and sought to use Charlie's situation to enlist the help of the authorities for revenge. As a result, the focus was more on Susanna Mattise's issue, with a limited understanding of Charlie.

After the assembled participants discussed the strange case in Aunett, Mr. K's attendant unveiled an object shrouded in a black cloth.

Another attendant introduced, "This is a painting from a friend of one of our participants.

"He was a fellow Beyonder who met an untimely and bizarre end two months ago. Before his death, he created this painting."

With a swift motion, the attendant removed the black cloth, revealing the deceased Beyonder's final masterpiece.

The oil painting was a riot of vivid colors, weaving a surreal and mesmerizing scene.

Towering green weeds reached for the heavens, a golden sun lay hidden in a well, a blood-red river cascaded from the sky, a

shadowy figure danced, and white skulls coalesced into clouds...
Merely glancing at the painting left Lumian feeling disoriented.
The attendant who had introduced the painting elaborated, "This artwork bears a potent psychic imprint. It affects the minds of all who view it, inducing confusion and vertigo to varying degrees. Prolonged exposure could even result in mental illness.
"According to the letters and diary entries left by the painting's creator, it may hold clues to the essence of reality and the origins of mysticism.
"This could also be the key to understanding the true nature of his strange demise.
"Any participant interested in studying the painting can negotiate a price."
You want to sell something like this for money? I wouldn't take it even if you offered it for free! Lumian grumbled internally, tearing his gaze away.
He wanted nothing to do with anything that concealed the truth, essence, or origin of the world. As Aurore had once said, one shouldn't look at or study things one shouldn't see or understand.
Lumian's interests lay solely in Beyonder characteristics, potion formulas, mystical items, Beyonder weapons, or valuable mysticism knowledge.
It was apparent that most of the gathering's participants were reluctant to spend money on such a foreboding painting shrouded in mystery. Ultimately, Mr. K's attendant put it away, once again veiling it with the black cloth.
Following that, the gathering transitioned into an open discussion stage. Attendees engaged in casual conversation about rumors and legends, careful to hide any details of their true identities.
At 10:15, Mr. K declared the gathering over, and the participants dispersed in groups.
As he departed, Lumian detected the organizer sizing him up, scrutinizing his every move.
Will he send someone to follow and investigate me? Lumian couldn't help but wonder.
Rather than being concerned, he was eager for it to happen.
Aside from occasionally summoning a messenger, his behavior was unremarkable. He could withstand any scrutiny!
As long as he refrained from contacting Madam Magician, Lumian believed Mr. K would soon receive an almost entirely truthful report—Ciel, a wild Beyonder lacking common sense in many areas, was suspected to hail from Cordu and sought Guillaume Bénet and his associates. He was also a wanted man.
In this scenario, if Lumian demonstrated his skills and extreme

attitude, it wouldn't be long before he received an invitation from Mr. K to join his ranks and become a part of the organization behind him.
Sometimes, "inadvertently" revealing one's vulnerabilities and true circumstances was an effective means of gaining trust.
With that, Lumian and Osta found a concealed corner at 19 Rue Scheer, where they removed their disguises before returning to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
As he made his way towards Rue Anarchie, Lumian's brow furrowed in confusion.
He hadn't noticed anyone tailing him.
Is it because Mr. K has no plans to investigate me, or had the person shadowing me been so skilled and uniquely gifted that I had failed to detect their presence? Lumian pondered the possibilities but ultimately pushed them to the back of his mind.
In any case, he wouldn't fear an investigation, unless Mr. K was in league with the Poison Spur Mob.
Upon entering Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian noted that he was still early. He crossed the now pristine lobby and descended into the basement bar.
Before he could take in the scene, Charlie's exuberant voice reached his ears.
"Can you believe it? Just three hours ago, I was at police headquarters, accused of murder. Now, here I am, drinking and singing with all of you!
"Ladies and gentlemen, I've had an incredible experience like no other. I bet none of you can top it..."
The apprentice attendant leaped onto a small round table, beer bottle in hand, and addressed the surrounding patrons.
His short brown hair was disheveled, as if it hadn't been tended to in days, and stubble was evident around his mouth.
Already? Lumian had anticipated it would take Charlie another two or three days to be released.
Spotting Lumian from the table, Charlie waved his short arm and called out to the crowd, "I'll share that even stranger encounter with you all later!"
Donning a linen shirt and black pants, he hopped off the table and jogged to the bar counter, beer bottle in hand. He took a seat beside Lumian and said to the ponytailed bartender, Pavard Neeson, "A glass of absinthe! Thank you."
Turning to Lumian, he said, "This one's on me."
Lumian accepted the offer with a calm smile.
"You're looking pretty good."
"Of course. At least I don't have to worry about being hanged. I'd

hate for thousands to gather around me as I die, considering how nobody cares about me when I'm alive," Charlie said, relief evident on his face.
Trier's citizens reveled in witnessing the execution of death row inmates.
Whenever someone faced the gallows or a firing squad, the streets would overflow with onlookers.
In the classical era before Emperor Roselle, there even existed a custom centered around this fascination: En route from the prison to the gallows, if any bystander agreed to marry the condemned, their sentence would be commuted, reduced, or even entirely absolved.
"Are you completely fine?" Lumian inquired further.
Charlie took a swig of beer and scanned the room. Lowering his voice, he said, "I can't divulge the specifics. I signed a pledge, a notarized pledge. You can't imagine how powerful that is..."
Charlie caught himself and continued, "The only downside is that I've lost my job again. That blasted foreman thinks I've tarnished the hotel's image. No matter. I'll pawn the diamond necklace tomorrow. The officers have already returned it to me. That money will tide me over for quite some time. I can treat the café waiters on Rue des Blouses Blanches to drinks. I'll surely find a better job!"
He wanted to add, "Let's go together when the time comes," but recalling Ciel's nerve and capabilities, he quietly discarded the idea.
Lumian sipped the absinthe the bartender had slid his way and gestured for Charlie to join him in an empty corner.
Once certain that the noise around them was sufficient to drown out their conversation and that no one was eavesdropping, Lumian asked, "Has the situation with Susanna Matisse been resolved?"
"I don't know." Charlie shook his head. "They did a lot of things, but I can't tell you."
"Did they promise to provide protection for a period of time?" Lumian asked thoughtfully.
Charlie replied awkwardly, "I can't tell you."
Lumian grinned, retorting, "Seems like there is."
If they hadn't promised protection, the corresponding words wouldn't exist and wouldn't be restricted by the confidentiality pledge.
"Uh..." Charlie hadn't expected Ciel to guess so accurately.
Lumian inquired, "Did they tell you anything? Share what you can."
Charlie pondered for a moment and said, "They told me not to panic if I had that dream again. I'm to head to the nearest

cathedral after dawn. You don't know about the Eternal Blazing Sun's cathedral, do you? I'm now a true believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun!"
Lumian expressionlessly raised his right hand and traced a triangle on his chest.
"..." Charlie fell silent.
After drinking with Charlie, Lumian returned to Room 207 and continued studying Aurore's grimoire.
He washed up before midnight, lay on the bed, and drifted off to sleep.
Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!
Lumian was jolted awake by an insistent knocking on the door.
Who could it be? Frowning, he gripped Fallen Mercury and cautiously approached the door, cracking it open.
Charlie stood outside.
Still clad in a linen shirt, black pants, and strapless leather shoes, his face was ashen and fear-stricken.
Upon seeing Lumian, he appeared to regain his composure. Nearly losing control of his voice, he stammered in terror, "I dreamed of that woman again!"

Chapter 141: "Hostage"

In the dimly lit corridor, bathed in the eerie glow of the crimson moon, Charlie's voice echoed, sending shivers down one's spine.

Dreaming of Susanna Mattise again? Lumian's alarm gave way to surging anger.

Are you out of your damn mind? If you had that dream again, go to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and find a clergyman! I'm not your father to have you report your wet dreams to me!

Casting a glance at Charlie, whose face was a mask of terror, Lumian reined in his emotions and spoke in a low voice, "Relax. This was bound to happen. For now, get some sleep and seek help from the nearest cathedral at dawn."

Charlie appeared on the verge of tears.

"B-but, in my dream, she said if I dared to seek help from the Church, she'd kill me on my way to the cathedral!"

"You communicated in the dream?" Lumian was taken aback.

Charlie nodded frantically.

"Yes. Before, she never spoke in my dreams. She only satisfied me, warm and gentle. This time, she warned me. She warned me!"

Could it be that Susanna Mattise hasn't fully transformed into a monstrous creature and still possesses some level of intelligence? Lumian's thoughts raced, and he felt a pang of sympathy for Charlie.

If Charlie couldn't get help from official Beyonders, he'd likely end up like the three female victims in Aunett Town, lost in dreams until drained of life.

Hold on, are the official Beyonders handling Charlie's situation so carelessly? Didn't they consider the possibility of Charlie being killed by Susanna Mattise? Lumian instantly thought of Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.

None of them would dismiss the case so casually, merely instructing the victim to rush to a cathedral if he faced any issues.

Remembering how the clergyman from the Church stayed with the lunatic upstairs and protected him after encountering the Montsouris ghost, Lumian grew suspicious.

The official Beyonders overseeing Charlie's case intentionally downplayed the threat posed by Susanna Mattise, allowing him to return to the motel. They claimed the situation was mostly resolved and instructed him to seek help from the cathedral if any issues arose—all to lure Susanna Mattise into revealing herself again!

Realizing this, Lumian looked at Charlie and said coolly, "If you trust me, return to your room, lie down, close your eyes, and sleep

until dawn. Don't worry, it'll all be sorted out."
Lumian appeared unruffled, but inwardly, he was cursing.
Get your ass back to the fifth floor! By now, the official Beyonders monitoring the area should've detected the anomaly and be preparing to act. *Why are you standing in front of my door?* Are you trying to get me caught?
"I, I..." Charlie hesitated, his eyes filled with terror.
Will everything truly be resolved if I do nothing?
Lumian exhaled and forced a smile.
"Idiot. Susanna Mattise warned you not to seek help from the Church. She said nothing about me. I can help you get to the nearest cathedral!"
Lumian resorted to coaxing and deception, desperate for Charlie to leave the second floor.
Charlie's face brightened, and he exclaimed excitedly, "Thank you, thank you!"
The moment he spoke, Lumian caught the scent of vegetation, tainted with an unsettling aroma.
In an instant, greenish-brown vines and branches unfurled from the walls, ceiling, and floor. They sealed the windows and doors of the other rooms.
At the staircase, a woman's voice, both beguiling and unnerving, rang out.
"Charlie, are you really going to betray me?"
Charlie's eyes widened in shock as he turned toward the sound.
He saw the woman from his dreams, her turquoise hair cascading from her head to the floor, reaching out to the surrounding walls and ceiling above, melding with vines and branches.
Without her turquoise hair shrouding her body, Susanna Mattise stood entirely exposed, her beautiful curves on display. Scattered among her flesh were flower buds and tree warts—some red, some white, some green, and some brown.
As she spoke, the vivid flower buds and bluish tree warts opened and closed, oozing a foul-smelling, viscous liquid.
The repulsive scene left Charlie feeling as if he'd plunged into a nightmare. He stood there, trembling, his mind a haze.
Susanna Mattise looked at Charlie, her eyes brimming with affection.
"Have you forgotten our blissful moments in the dream? Charlie, I'm your wife."
Snapping out of his stupor, Charlie nearly crumbled.
"No! No!"
You idiot! Just say something to placate Susanna! Lumian cursed himself for not reacting quickly enough to silence Charlie.

Susanna's expression frosted over.
"Then stay with me forever."
At her words, the terror in Charlie's eyes vanished, replaced by infatuation as he eagerly moved toward the monstrous being.
A moist flower bud on Susanna's lower abdomen opened unnaturally wide, unlike the other flower buds and tree warts that closed slowly.
It seemed to await Charlie.
Simultaneously, Susanna glared at Lumian, her voice seething with hatred, "It's all your fault. You incited Charlie to betray me!"
"Why don't you take a look in the mirror and see how horrifying and repulsive you've become? If I were Charlie, I would've kicked you out of my dream from the start!" Lumian's instincts told him pleading for mercy was futile. Instead, he chose to retaliate and provoke Susanna, hoping to uncover her weakness.
Merely standing near the bizarre creature, Lumian felt a mix of exhilaration and dread. He longed for her, yet resisted, as if caught in a whirlpool of desire, consumed by an overpowering sense of helplessness.
This proved she was far stronger than him!
Lumian cursed inwardly as his thoughts raced, searching for a way to buy time.
He was sure the official Beyonders would arrive soon!
What in the world is this monster?
Why does she believe she's Charlie's wife?
Wife...
In that instant, as Susanna Mattise screeched, incensed by his words, an idea struck Lumian.
As her scream filled the air, vines and branches surged toward Lumian, amplifying the fear lurking in his heart to the point of near-collapse.
His legs weakened, and his body trembled uncontrollably.
Summoning his ruthlessness, Lumian managed to extend his right hand, grabbing Charlie, who was about to rush toward the creature.
With Fallen Mercury in his left hand, he pressed the sinister dirk to Charlie's throat.
Susanna Mattise looked bewildered, her anger palpable.
"What are you doing?"
Lumian smirked menacingly.
"I forgot to mention, my Beyonder weapon is called Cursed Blade.
"A single cut drawing blood will curse his entire family to death, including his wife.
"And you're Charlie's wife!"

Recalling the lunatic upstairs, Lumian suspected that the Montsouris ghost would target not only one's immediate family but also their spouse.
Although he didn't understand how a spouse was determined in mysticism, since Susanna Mattise claimed to be Charlie's wife, he treated her as such!
Of course, Lumian knew allowing Fallen Mercury to curse Charlie with the fate of the Montsouris ghost wouldn't immediately impact Susanna Mattise. It wouldn't affect the present situation at all.
He gambled that Susanna Mattise didn't know this, and that she could sense the danger in Fallen Mercury.
It was a bluff!
Susanna Mattise's expression froze, and the attacking vines and branches halted midair.
Her jade-green eyes radiated menace.
Lumian's vision shifted. He saw Guillaume Bénet, the hawk-nosed padre clad in a white robe adorned with golden threads.
Suppressed hatred erupted like a volcano.
Lumian released Charlie and advanced toward the "Guillaume Bénet" he had locked onto.
But before him stood only Susanna Mattise.
In that instant, Charlie, his face awash with infatuation, saw Lumian approaching his "wife" with a dirk. He lunged at the assailant, shouting, "Don't hurt her!"
Lumian snapped to his senses, realizing Guillaume Bénet had morphed into Susanna Mattise, her flower buds and tree warts blossoming one by one!
She controlled my emotions? In his shock, Lumian twisted violently, seizing Charlie again and pressing Fallen Mercury to his throat.
Susanna Mattise didn't conceal her disappointment. After a moment's silence, she parted her red lips.
Suddenly, the creature halted, staring solemnly at the wall near Rue Anarchie in Auberge du Coq Doré.
In the next second, her turquoise hair retracted, and the vines and branches disintegrated, vanishing.
Wh— The official Beyonders are here? Lumian watched Susanna Mattise's figure burrow through the wall and disappear from the corridor.
He released Charlie and shook him, urging him to wake up. He quickly instructed,
"Lie down on the second-floor stairs and keep your eyes closed until someone wakes you!"

With that, Lumian pushed Charlie and retreated to his room, closing the wooden door and feigning sleep, like the other tenants.
As Susanna departed, the obsession faded from Charlie's eyes. When Lumian jolted him back to reality, he had no choice but to follow Lumian's directions. He jogged to the staircase leading to the ground floor, lay down, and closed his eyes, feigning unconsciousness.
Almost simultaneously, a red hue filled Charlie and Lumian's vision, as though the sun had risen prematurely, heralding the day.
...
Minutes later, a golden sword formed from light stabbed into the ground of Rue Anarchie, skewering a writhing turquoise vine.
"Is it resolved?" A young man with the Sun Sacred Emblem pinned to his chest asked the one brandishing the sword.
He was a rugged man with blond hair, golden eyebrows, and a golden beard, wearing a brown coat adorned with two rows of golden buttons.
He exhaled and declared, "We've resolved it for now, but unless we find the origin of this evil spirit, it's only a matter of time before she regenerates there."

Chapter 142: Mother Tree

"Evil spirits can reform again?" The young man bearing the Sun Sacred Emblem on his chest inquired, astonished.

From his mysticism knowledge and experience gained through case files, he knew that unless an evil spirit possessed unique abilities, purification equated to total annihilation.

Such soul-type entities were either the offspring of powerful Beyonders' deaths or vengeful spirits that managed to break through various constraints. The mightiest could even wield a degree of godhood, but resurrection and rebirth were not among their traits.

The blond man, clad in a double-breasted brown coat, straightened up and eyed the dissipating, writhing vines. After some thought, he said, "Evil spirits can have unique distinctions. Under specific conditions, they rely on an object to be born. This object often lies at the heart of their territory.

"As long as this object remains intact, the evil spirit, even if not entirely purified, will gradually reform within the corresponding area."

Evil spirits would assimilate their birthplaces, merging with the spirit world and the Underworld to obtain the power necessary to maintain their existence. Otherwise, they would slowly weaken until they vanished completely.

In essence, evil spirits had a fixed range of activity and couldn't wander far from their birthplaces. This was their "territory."

The young man donned in the Sun Sacred Emblem and a white robe adorned with golden threads roughly grasped the reasoning. He furrowed his brow and said, "We've been searching for days, yet we haven't found the birthplace of the evil spirit, Susanna Matisse."

Logically, Susanna Matisse couldn't stray far from her territory. If official Beyonders carefully searched Rue Anarchie and its vicinity, they would surely locate the evil spirit's birthplace and destroy the object it depended on.

However, this was Trier, a city with not only an above-ground area but also an underground section. Another Rue Anarchie and Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman mirrored the area above, with numerous obscure paths and empty spaces.

More crucially, deeper underground, lay Trier from the Fourth Epoch. Even for official Beyonders, it was a perilous place they scarcely comprehended.

As a deacon of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman's Inquisition, Angoulême de François had never understood why Trier had been

rebuilt atop the original site, right above the sunken Trier of the Fourth Epoch, in the late era.
Although geographically ideal, this decision had spawned countless troubles over the ensuing thousand years.
The Purifiers weren't incapable of resolving the Beyonder incidents; they just couldn't get to the root of the problem, hidden within the underground ruins of the Fourth Epoch's Trier.
Rumor had it that not even Demigods dared or were willing to venture into those depths.
Angoulême sheathed his golden longsword, which seemed to be condensed light, into a grayish-white, steam-powered humanoid head contraption, allowing it to sink into the corresponding "vertebrae."
Dark liquid seemed to fill the device.
A man in a white suit, yellow vest, and light-colored shirt, adorned with the Sun Sacred Emblem, emerged from Auberge du Coq Doré.
His light-yellow hair was neatly combed, skin-colored tape covered the bridge of his nose, and his lips were thick. A hint of a Southern Continent ancestry showed through his slightly brown skin.
"Deacon, I've spoken to Charlie Collent," he reported to Angoulême de François.
Angoulême touched the golden button on his brown coat, asking, "Is he alright?"
The brown-skinned man shook his head, replying, "We arrived just in time. He wasn't physically harmed.
"According to him, after he dreamed of Susanna Matisse again, although she warned him, he still chose to seek help. He was intercepted by Susanna Matisse on the second floor of the motel and almost became one with her forever. At least, that's what she said.
"After that, Charlie collapsed at the staircase and almost fainted. At that moment, he saw a light like the sun rising."
This development seemed normal and reasonable, aligning with the details provided by the Purifier elite team led by Angoulême. Neither Angoulême nor the other two Purifiers had any doubts.
In their understanding, Charlie's request for help was in accordance with their instructions to head to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.
Angoulême surveyed the unusually quiet Rue Anarchie and nodded slightly.
"For now, let's put Charlie Collent aside. But if we don't find Susanna Mattise's birthplace in two weeks, consider arranging a civilian job for him and telling him the truth."
This was the standard procedure used by official Beyonders to

protect ordinary people who had yet to fully escape the influence of Beyonder events.
Of course, it often appeared they had resolved the problem and informed the victim to live peacefully, only for the person to die mysteriously weeks, months, or years later.
Angoulême continued, "We have two priorities. First, investigate this area, including the underground, to find Susanna Mattise's birthplace. Second, locate the person who warned us with the letter. He seems to have deep knowledge of Susanna Mattise."
Before releasing Charlie, Angoulême and his team had secretly investigated Auberge du Coq Doré but found no suspicious areas that could be the birthplace of the evil spirit.
Additionally, they had used Beyonder methods to verify Charlie's encounter and confession. They confirmed that the victim had interacted with ordinary people from the moment he prayed to Susanna Matisse until he was arrested by the police.
That was why Angoulême suggested not to worry about Charlie's situation for the time being.
As for the sender, he had impressive methods and extensive anti-divination and anti-tracking experience. He had chosen to use a spirit world creature to write and send the letter.
It was worth noting that even when using the same descriptive incantation to summon a spirit world creature, a different one would likely appear each time.
The challenge with using just a three-line description was that it could potentially match hundreds of thousands of spirit world creatures, if not more. What they could summon each time relied solely on chance.
Without a corresponding medium and a description that highlighted the subject's unique traits, it was nearly impossible to zero in on the target spirit using the incantation alone. Most spirit world creatures simply weren't distinctive enough.
Angoulême had previously sought the help of colleagues adept in such matters. Employing the letter as a medium, he tried summoning the associated spirit world creature, hoping to glean any clues from it. Alas, whether it was the letter's transcriber, author, or sender, they came up empty-handed.
The issue could have been a flaw in the descriptive statement, or perhaps the corresponding spirit world creature sensed their ill intentions and refused the summoning.
Even with a flawless summoning ritual, it could still fail if the spirit world creatures fitting the description declined to respond. Only those Sequences skilled in summoning could significantly boost the odds or even force the issue. Naturally, Beyonders rarely

faced such obstacles. Their three-line descriptions cast a wide net, ensnaring numerous spirit world creatures, with a handful always eager to enter the real world and absorb some spirituality.

...

Lumian feigned sleep, poised to flee at a moment's notice.

It wasn't until the nearby cathedral clock struck six that he allowed himself a sigh of relief.

Seems like the battle between the official Beyonders and Susanna Mattise has ended. They didn't even realize I briefly confronted her... Lumian rolled out of bed and rubbed his face.

He couldn't be certain if the official Beyonders had completely neutralized Susanna Mattise or if this ordeal was truly over.

Recalling Susanna's intense hatred for him, Lumian knew he couldn't rely on hope alone.

He decided to write a letter to Madam Magician, reporting his encounter with Mr. K and inquiring about Susanna Mattise's nature and weaknesses.

For good measure, he also planned to ask Hela, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president—after all, Madam Magician wasn't all-knowing.

After penning the two letters and tidying the room, Lumian summoned two messengers at ten-minute intervals, ensuring each took the correct letter.

By the time he finished washing up and returned to Room 207, there were already two replies waiting silently on the wooden table.

Wow, Madam Magician is quick too. Did the messengers run into each other? If so, what would they talk about? Lumian muttered, picking up one of the replies.

The letter was from Hela.

"Similar cases have occurred in the Northern and Southern Continents. Men and women often dreamed of the opposite sex and engaged in intimate acts, ultimately dying from exhaustion.

"If the victims have partners or lovers, these innocents are killed one by one by creatures like Susanna Mattise. These creatures seem to believe they're the dreamer's spouse.

"Such creatures are said to possess powerful abilities on par with Mid-Sequence Beyonders.

"Some details suggest Susanna may have already died, becoming a vengeful or evil spirit..."

It is indeed quite powerful... Lumian recalled his encounter the previous night, realizing that without Fallen Mercury's deterrence, Charlie as a "hostage," and Susanna's conviction that she was Charlie's wife, he might have been defeated within a minute.

After burning Hela's reply with a flame conjured from his spirituality, Lumian unfolded Madam Magician's letter.

"I'm unsure whether to congratulate or commiserate with you. Your chances of encountering an evil god's Blessed seem higher than those of ordinary Beyonders. This may be due to the corruption sealed within you.

"It's difficult to explain this phenomenon using the law of convergence of Beyonder characteristics. It's more like repulsive forces rejected by this world, attracting each other.

"That's my theory. I can't guarantee its accuracy. If I'm wrong, don't forget to inform me and provide the correct answer.

"Based on your account, I suspect Susanna was once a believer of an evil god, who bestowed her with strength equivalent to a Sequence 5.

"That evil god goes by the pseudonym Mother Tree of Desire in this world. Don't attempt to understand Her, let alone guess Her true and complete title.

"Susanna is likely a Fallen Tree Spirit or Spirit of Lust, also known as Baby Cupid in some regions. They can appear as men or women, engaging in intimate acts within dreams and absorbing the victim's energy. Over time, their possessiveness leads them to believe they're the victim's spouse, driving them to kill the victim's partner or lover in a fit of jealousy.

"However, Susanna also exhibited traits of a soul-type entity. It's highly plausible she met her demise in an accident or failed to endure the boon, morphing into an evil spirit. She grew increasingly paranoid, clinging to her instincts."

Chapter 143: Lie

Having briefly outlined the nature and territorial tendencies of malevolent spirits, the woman known as Magician continued,

"Though Susanna Mattise's power is on par with a Sequence 5, it's not impossible for you to handle her. You could use the dirk on Charlie and swap your fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost with his. After the Montsouris ghost kills Susanna Mattise, you can transfer the fate of encountering it back into the knife.

"Alright, that was a joke. This plan has far too many uncertainties. It's virtually impossible to pull off.

"Firstly, the Montsouris ghost might only kill those who come across it.

"Secondly, even if the Montsouris ghost does kill Susanna Mattise, you won't know. You wouldn't be able to change fate in time without affecting Charlie.

"Thirdly, Charlie shouldn't be an orphan. His parents and siblings might still be alive. No one knows if the Montsouris ghost will leave Trier to kill.

"Fourthly, the Montsouris ghost might not be able to kill Susanna Mattise.

"Fifthly, Charlie himself admitted that he and Susanna are mystically bound as husband and wife.

"I'm saying all of this mainly to discourage you from going down that path. Using Charlie as a 'hostage' suggests that you're inclined to take such risks.

"Actually, this situation presents both a crisis and an opportunity.

"For you, the best solution is to ask Mr. K for help in dealing with the threat posed by Susanna Mattise.

"Remember, asking for help is an effective way to build relationships and earn someone's trust. Of course, the other party must be willing and capable.

"You can showcase your potential and make Mr. K see that you're valuable.

"I wish you the best of luck. I hope you can quickly gain Mr. K's initial trust and join that organization."

Lumian's initial reaction to the letter was that Madam Magician tended to ramble and digress. She seemed to enjoy finding lofty excuses and often entertained far-fetched notions bordering on absurdity. This contrasted sharply with Madam Hela's succinct and polished reply.

This writing style must be Madam Magician's trademark... Lumian pursed his lips, summoned his spiritual energy, and ignited a flame, burning the paper in his hand.

After reading the two letters, he discarded the idea of using Fallen Mercury to resolve his issue with Susanna Mattise. Their fates had been entwined for more than just a brief moment. It couldn't be as simple as erasing the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost.
In comparison, seeking Mr. K's assistance was indeed an effective solution Lumian hadn't considered.
This could quickly bridge the gap between him and Mr. K, fulfilling Madam Magician's mission.
After contemplating for a moment and determining how to approach Mr. K and demonstrate his worth, Lumian changed into a grayish-blue worker's uniform, put on a dark-blue cap, and left Room 207.
Upon reaching the ground floor, Lumian saw Charlie lingering near the entrance, wearing a linen shirt and black pants.
"What are you up to?" he asked with a grin.
Charlie forced a smile.
"Ciel, can you come with me to the pawnshop? I'll treat you to breakfast and lunch!"
The establishment's official name was Pawnbroker Shop or Pawnshop Company.
"To the pawnshop?" Lumian sidled up to Charlie and lowered his voice. "Are you alright?"
Charlie glanced around and gave a bitter smile.
"They said there's no problem this time. Susanna, that evil spirit, has been purified.
"Whether there's an issue or not, life has to go on. Haha, I heard that from a hotel guest. Sounds pretty sophisticated, right?
"Anyway, for people like us, a day without work puts us on the brink of financial ruin. We'd soon be hungry again. I have to pawn the diamond necklace for cash. You know, only cash gives people a sense of security. Clothes and jewelry can't do that. Even food is lacking!"
At this point, Charlie's excitement grew.
"Madame Alice said the necklace is worth 1,500 verl d'or. If I pawn it, I should get around 1,000.
"My god. I've never seen 1,000 verl d'or before. Even if I become an attendant foreman, it'd take me years, maybe more than a decade, to save that much!
"When it's time, we'll have lunch at a café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. I want DuVar broth, coarse salt beef in red wine sauce, and apple tenderloin!"
Did you learn nothing else at Hôtel du Cygne Blanc, just the names of dishes? Lumian grumbled and asked thoughtfully, "You want me to protect you?"

Charlie laughed.
"I'd be scared carrying that much money alone. Ciel, you might not have had that experience yet—thinking everyone's a thief who'll rob you on the streets.
"I felt that way when I got the necklace. I was so nervous, I nearly passed out. Can you imagine?"
"Yes." Lumian smiled. "I probably won't have that experience. Not now, not ever, because I'm the one who makes others think I want to rob them."
Take Margot, for example, who had just forked over more than 1,000 verl d'or, nearly enough to buy the diamond necklace!
Charlie's smile froze.
After a few seconds, he forced a smile and said, "That's why I want you to come with me to the pawnshop."
He had seriously doubted Ciel's means of making money. His neighbor was clearly capable and smart, but he wasn't rushing to find a job. He roamed around daily, seemingly without money troubles, but lived at Auberge du Coq Doré, not Hôtel du Cygne Blanc.
Remembering how Ciel had posed as a lawyer to infiltrate the police station, provided vital information, and helped him survive Susanna Mattise's threat, Charlie felt it was a small concern.
Even if Ciel's a thief, robber, or con artist, he's one who risked his life to help me!
Pleased with Charlie's apprehensive expression, Lumian asked, grinning, "Which pawnshop are you going to?"
"I heard the pawnshops in Quartier de l'Observatoire offer better prices." Charlie had already decided.
Lumian nodded.
"I'm actually headed to Quartier de l'Observatoire."
He planned to ask Osta Trul for Mr. K's contact information.
Charlie was thrilled. He spent a whopping 1 verl d'or to treat Lumian to a barbecue pie, cream bun, and plum wine. Naturally, this included his own portion.
Lumian graciously accepted.
Exiting Rue Anarchie, Charlie winced when he saw Lumian heading straight for the public carriage sign.
He glanced around, making sure no one was nearby, and whispered,
"Last night, you said your blade was called the Cursed Blade. Will anyone cut by it really have their entire family die?"
Before meeting Susanna Mattise, Charlie never believed in such things. Even if he had heard about them, they were just fodder for boasting and tall tales. But now, he couldn't help but wonder if Ciel

truly wielded a mystical weapon.
Lumian turned to Charlie and grinned.
"Want to give it a try?"
Charlie shuddered and smiled sheepishly. "I believe you."
"Do you? Well, I was just bluffing Susanna Mattise last night. I'm just an ordinary guy. If I hadn't, I'd be dead!" Lumian said, still smiling. "Doesn't the Cursed Blade story I made up ring a bell? You've heard of the Montsouris ghost legend when that maniac was having his bout of clarity, right?"
Charlie's eyes widened in realization.
That's it! It's a spin on the Montsouris ghost legend!
Ciel is a master of deception. An ordinary person managed to fool that malevolent spirit, Susanna Mattise, and saved our lives!
I only spin tall tales in bars and occasionally lie. I can't even begin to compare to him.
He's got guts and smarts. A person like that is destined to make it big!
Seeing that Charlie genuinely believed the lie he'd just spun, Lumian did his best to keep a straight face.
He asked earnestly, "Are your parents still alive? Do you have siblings?"
"..." Charlie was taken aback and leaped to the side like a spooked rabbit. "Why do you ask?"
Could it be that the Cursed Blade is real? Is he trying to figure out which family members I have?
Lumian couldn't contain his laughter anymore.
"You're not actually scared, are you? Aren't you too easily pranked?"
Charlie slapped his forehead, exasperated with the thought of the Idiot Instrument.
He couldn't distinguish which of Ciel's words were false and which were true.
However, after being pranked, he felt even more certain that the Cursed Blade was fake and based on the Montsouris ghost legend.
Ciel loves using such fabrications to fool others, just like the Idiot Instrument.
Hmm... The Cursed Blade story is a good one. Now that it's mine, I'll use it at the bar tonight to spook people!
The two of them arrived at Quartier de l'Observatoire in a public carriage. Charlie asked for directions several times before finally finding Phil's Pawnbroker Shop.
Housed in a seven-story off-white building, it featured pillars, arches, relief sculptures, and large windows.
Etched above the grand entrance were the words: "Freedom, equality, fraternity"

Freedom to pawn any item; equality to discriminate against anyone who comes to pawn something? Fraternity to seize every opportunity to lowball prices? Lumian couldn't help but criticize.
How ridiculous for a pawnshop to carve the Republic's political slogan on their door?
Inside the hall, there were several counters, with rows of benches in front of them.
At the moment, dozens of people sat there, waiting for the clerk to appraise their items and call their number.
Charlie easily found an empty counter and handed over the diamond necklace. He received a slip with the item's name and corresponding number for appraisal.
Soon, Charlie's number was called from the counter.
He walked over with anticipation, only to return looking as if his spirit had been crushed.
Lumian, who was browsing newspapers in the hall, asked in confusion, "What's wrong?"
Charlie spoke in a daze, his voice tinged with disappointment, "That necklace, that necklace is a fake. It's only worth 12 verl d'or..."

Chapter 144: Conditions

Fake? Lumian's right eyebrow twitched, as if fate was mercilessly mocking Charlie.

Charlie had forsaken his fragile principles and bedded Madame Alice for days, only to get embroiled in a life-threatening lawsuit and lose his job as an apprentice attendant—all for a counterfeit diamond necklace?

For some reason, Lumian felt a sudden urge to defy fate.

This wasn't his problem, but he couldn't shake the feeling.

To hell with this inevitable destiny!

You mock me, so I'll mock and provoke you in return!

In that moment, Lumian began to grasp another aspect of the Provoker's acting principles, albeit crudely and imprecisely.

He eyed Charlie and asked thoughtfully, "Do you think Madam Alice lied to you, or did the pawnshop see your desperate situation, knowing you couldn't determine the necklace's authenticity, and use it as an excuse to offer the lowest possible price?"

"I-I don't know." Charlie was at a loss and in pain.

After a pause, he added with difficulty, "I suspect it's Madame Alice. Look, there are so many people here pawning their items. Appraisers handle dozens or hundreds of items every day, most of them valuable. They can't just lie to me, right?

"H-how could she..."

Charlie couldn't go on.

Can't pawnshops deceive everyone equally? Lowballing the offer as much as possible, especially for the pricey items? Lumian scoffed.

"Why not?

"Many wealthy people don't amass fortunes through kindness and hard work. If they can trick you with a fake, why give you the real deal?

"Maybe Madame Alice is one of those people. She might not even be that rich. She relied on staying at the Hôtel du Cygne Blanc to dupe a gullible lad like you."

Lumian didn't distrust every rich person. Many had made their fortunes through talent, hard work, and opportunity—like Aurore.

Stung by Lumian's words, Charlie's face twisted with anger.

He muttered to himself bitterly, "That's right. During this time, Madame Alice hasn't even treated me to a big meal. She only calls me to her room at seven or eight at night for... service."

You're so naive. Are you really from Reem? Lumian couldn't help but facepalm.

He stood up and said, "Get that necklace back. Let's try another pawnshop. What if it's real?"

Charlie was taken aback.
"Alright, alright!"
He wasn't satisfied either.
Lumian urged him, "Be vigilant. We can't let them switch the necklace."
"Yes." Charlie tried his best to rally. "I've been studying that necklace daily recently and memorized every detail!"
After retrieving the diamond necklace, Lumian accompanied Charlie to two other pawnshops in Quartier de l'Observatoire.
The appraisal results were the same as before. The necklace was fake and worth only 11 to 15 verl d'or.
Charlie's frustration mounted, and he crumbled.
Lumian glanced at him and consoled, "At least you can get a dozen verl d'or. It'll last you more than a week. With the money, you can buy drinks for waiters at cafés on Rue des Blouses Blanches and ask them to help you find a new job."
Including rent, Charlie spent about 1 verl d'or a day. If he skipped the underground bar, his expenses would be even less.
"Yeah..." Charlie sighed.
He was utterly disappointed. But after accepting reality, he found a glimmer of hope.
Lumian hesitated before suggesting, "We can't dismiss other possibilities. For instance, the pawnshops around here might have secret ways of communicating. They could specifically target people like you—those who don't dress well and pawn valuable items without proper documentation. How about taking the necklace to a specialized jewelry shop for appraisal?"
"We'd have to pay a fee." Charlie's face clouded with worry.
If the appraisal confirmed its authenticity, that would be great. But if it turned out to be fake, his already meager assets would be reduced by a third or even half.
Lumian sighed and offered, "Hand me the diamond necklace, and I'll find a friend to appraise it for you—one who won't charge.
"You've still got some cash to get you through the day, right?"
"I have 2.6 verl d'or left." With hope in his eyes, Charlie handed the diamond necklace to Lumian.
As Lumian pocketed the necklace, he grinned and asked, "Are you not worried that the appraisal might prove it genuine, but I'll return a fake one to you and claim there's no issue with the pawnshops' assessment?"
"..." Charlie's face tensed once more.
After a moment, he exhaled and admitted, "I trust you. Besides, I've already written it off as a fake."
Lumian waved goodbye to Charlie and strode toward Place du

Purgatoire.
...
Near the catacombs, Osta Trul occupied his customary seat facing the bonfire, clad in a hooded black robe.
Lumian approached and asked with a hint of amusement, "Don't you ever change areas?"
Osta chuckled and replied, "My divination and interpretation skills are fairly accurate. Many people have introduced their friends. If I switch locations, wouldn't I lose my clientele? They're all verl d'or!"
"What do you mean by clientele? They're clearly a bunch of fools," Lumian half-jokingly and mockingly remarked.
Osta didn't dare to argue.
Lumian inquired, "I need to discuss something with Mr. K. How can I reach him?"
So he's not here for me... Osta sighed in relief and quickly answered, "Anyone who has attended the gathering can go straight to Psychic's headquarters, located in the building where our gathering took place. At 19 Rue Scheer, knock on Room 103 with three long, two short, and one long beats. Someone will take you to see Mr. K.
"If you don't want to go in person, you can send a letter. Address it to Room 103, 19 Rue Scheer, Avenue du Boulevard. The recipient is Guillaume Pierre."
What a fake name... The knocking rhythm differs from the gathering's... Mr. K never told me this. Did he think Osta would inform me? Lumian nodded, bid Osta farewell, and returned above ground.
At the catacombs' entrance, he spotted a group of visitors carrying lit white candles, following the administrator through the naturally formed arch and into the Death Empire.
Withdrawing his gaze, Lumian took a public carriage to 19 Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard.
He lowered his cap and knocked on Room 103.
The dark-red wooden door creaked open, revealing a handsome young man with shoulder-length brown hair, resembling an artist.
The lad scrutinized Lumian with his dark brown eyes for a couple of seconds.
"Who are you looking for?"
"I'm Ciel. I need to speak with Mr. K," Lumian replied bluntly.
The young man cocked his head slightly, as if listening for a faint sound.
Soon, he instructed Lumian, "Follow me."
The lad led him to a vintage-styled room and unveiled a secret

door hidden within the dressing area.
A staircase descended underground, its walls on either side adorned with gas lamps encased in black grids.
Lumian entered the basement and traversed a short corridor before reaching a rather barren chamber.
He suspected other exits were present, some possibly connecting to areas in Underground Trier.
At that moment, Mr. K lounged in a red armchair, his face concealed by the shadow of his large hood.
The gathering's organizer studied Lumian wordlessly, exuding an unnerving air of intimidation.
Lumian pressed down on his cap and smiled.
"Good morning, Mr. K. I require your assistance.
"The price I'll have to pay is your call."
Mr. K remained silent for a few seconds before inquiring in a deep, raspy tone, "Does the Poison Spur Mob know you killed Margot?"
As expected... Lumian wasn't surprised that Mr. K had information on him.
When he attended the gathering, he deliberately wrapped his face in bandages to recreate his appearance when he killed Margot. He wanted Mr. K to be aware of it and display his worth and impulsive nature.
This could also help "earn" Mr. K's trust.
Lumian shook his head.
"It's another problem..."
Lumian recounted his encounter with Charlie and how he had helped him escape his predicament, only to be despised by Susanna Mattise and nearly killed by that peculiar creature. Fortunately, the official Beyonders had arrived in time. He didn't lie, but he didn't share too many details either.
This aligned with the information he sought at the gathering.
Mr. K listened intently and asked in a low voice, "You want divine protection?"
Divine protection? Aren't you overestimating yourself? Just protection! Lumian thought silently and nodded solemnly.
"Yes."
Mr. K rasped, "That creature is likely a soul-type being, akin to an evil spirit. Normally, it wouldn't affect you as long as you leave the market district. However, the official Beyonders have clearly taken an interest in this matter. If you move now, you might arouse suspicion. Moreover, if Susanna Mattise remembers or even marks you, you could be attacked anywhere. Many abilities can surpass distance limitations. There's no need for the creature to truly leave its territory."

No wonder the two ladies didn't suggest I leave... Lumian nodded thoughtfully.
"What should I do then?"
Mr. K spoke deliberately, "I can offer some protection, but you need to do something for me."
"What is it?" Lumian inquired "eagerly."
Mr. K clasped his hands together and said, "Join any gang in the market district and become a leader."
So the organization behind Mr. K wants to control the market district indirectly? Lumian agreed without hesitation, "No problem!"
Mr. K nodded slowly and held his left index finger with his right hand.
Then, he yanked the finger off, exposing a bloody wound and ghostly white bones.
Lumian winced at the sight.
Surprisingly, no blood flowed from Mr. K's wound or finger. Instead, it hovered at the edge, twisting and contracting as it gradually "healed."
"Take this with you. It can help you in critical moments." Mr. K tossed the severed finger to Lumian.
The flesh on his fingerless left hand writhed violently, as though a new digit was about to sprout.

Chapter 145: Service Fee

Lumian deftly extended his right hand, snatching the severed finger from the air.

Feeling its weight and the warmth that hadn't yet dissipated, he was both surprised and disturbed.

He had anticipated Mr. K would offer some form of protection, but he hadn't expected the man to rip off his own finger and toss it to him, claiming it could prove helpful in a tight spot!

Was this some kind of sick joke?

Setting aside the dubious utility of a severed digit, didn't Mr. K worry about the potential consequences of handing over a piece of his own flesh?

In the world of mysticism, one's flesh and blood held significant power. In the wrong hands, they could lead to disastrous consequences.

No one wanted to become the target of a horrifying curse without reason!

Given Mr. K's formidable abilities and his knowledge of mysticism, to the point of being able to act as a Notary, Lumian suspected the man had a way to nullify the various dangers associated with parting with his flesh. That was why he had dared to sever his own finger and hand it over.

Moreover, the detached finger was clearly imbued with magic.

I wonder if I can trade the prospect of meeting the Montsouris ghost with Mr. K by using Fallen Mercury, drawing blood when cutting this finger... As Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian was never short of unconventional ideas.

Suppressing the urge, he shifted his gaze from the finger back to Mr. K.

By now, Mr. K had regenerated a new finger, slightly damp and covered in delicate, fair skin.

"Thank you," Lumian murmured, stowing the severed finger in the pocket of his slate-blue workman's uniform.

Mr. K gave a curt nod and said, "You may leave. Don't forget our agreement."

"One more thing." Lumian produced the diamond necklace. "Could you help me determine if it's real or fake? I need to exchange it for some cash."

He already owed Mr. K a favor; he didn't mind owing a little more.

And if he couldn't repay the debt? At worst, he'd sell himself to the organization behind Mr. K!

That was Lumian's endgame.

Mr. K directed the attendant who had led Lumian underground to

pass the diamond necklace to him and examined it.
From the corner of his eye, Lumian could see a golden glow emanating from the shadows beneath Mr. K's hood.
After a few seconds, Mr. K handed the necklace back to the attendant.
"It's a fake. The craftsmanship is quite impressive, though. It's worth 50 verl d'or."
"Alright." Lumian didn't bother hiding his disappointment, adding, "I also need a set of identification papers."
A major reason he'd been staying at Auberge du Coq Doré was because they didn't require ID.
After receiving Mr. K's affirmation, Lumian left 19 Rue Scheer and caught a public carriage back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. His thoughts bounced between joining a gang without raising suspicion, pondering the purpose of the severed finger, and devising ways to get pawnshops to pay more for the counterfeit diamond necklace—at least 30 verl d'or...
Amid these thoughts, an idea began to crystallize.
Simultaneously, he planned to find a couple of safe houses in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique before noon—the kind that didn't require identification.
I still have 850 verl d'or and 24 coppet on me. After setting aside the remaining 400 for the information broker Anthony Reid, I'll have 450 verl d'or left. I can rent two or three safe houses... Lumian carefully calculated his remaining assets.
He pursed his lips, feeling an urgency to leave Mr. K's severed finger at Auberge du Coq Doré before securing a room.
...
By 3 p.m., Lumian had found rooms in both Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman on Rue des Blouses Blanches, and Quartier du Jardin Botanique on Rue des Pavés—neither of which required identification.
Naturally, there was a surcharge for such discretion. The former was hardly better than Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, costing 6 verl d'or per week. The latter, more akin to Osta Trul's rented apartment, neighbored factory workers from the south and cost 10 verl d'or per week.
Lumian paid four weeks' rent upfront but received no discounts.
Returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, he skimmed through Men's Aesthetics for a while, using cosmetics to soften his sharp features, add shadows, and trim his eyebrows.
Soon, Lumian had completed his initial disguise, transforming into an ordinary-looking man in his mid-twenties with a dangerous air.

After combing his golden-black hair, he donned a dark blue cap, took Mr. K's severed finger, and made his way to Salle de Bal Brise on Avenue du Marché.
Unlike other guests, he didn't enter directly. Instead, he stopped between the khaki building and the white spherical statue made of countless skulls, addressing the two gangsters guarding the entrance, "I need to see Baron Brignais."
Without waiting for their response, he added, "Tell the baron it's Ciel, from our last meeting. He'll be pleased to see me again."
The two gangsters exchanged glances, not daring to delay the baron's business. One of them entered the ballroom.
In under five minutes, the gang member reemerged, telling Lumian, "The baron wants you to meet him where you last saw him."
The café on the second floor? Lumian smirked. With hands in his pockets, he sauntered up the stairs and entered Salle de Bal Brise, spotting Baron Brignais with a mahogany-colored pipe.
The gentleman sported a black, thin tweed suit, a half top hat nearby, and a gleaming ring on his left hand. Four thugs flanked him.
"Sit." Baron Brignais's brown eyes scanned the room, his smile indicating the seat across the table.
Lumian approached and sat, studying Baron Brignais's sharp features and naturally curly brown hair, and said, "Good afternoon. We meet again."
Baron Brignais tapped the pipe's base, smiling as he asked, "What brings you here?"
Lumian produced Charlie's counterfeit diamond necklace, calmly stating,
"I've been strapped for cash and want to pawn this necklace to you. It's worth 1,500 verl d'or. I'll take 1,000."
Baron Brignais turned to a subordinate, commanding, "Get someone to appraise it."
"Yes, Baron." A thug with conspicuous bruises on his forehead left the café.
Brignais appraised Lumian again, nodding in approval.
"Not bad. Your makeup skills have come a long way. Although still flawed, you're no longer as easy to recognize."
"Thanks for the tip," Lumian grinned. "Men's Aesthetics is quite the resource."
They exchanged small talk until the thug who had left the café returned with a man in his forties, dressed in a formal suit and bow tie, carrying a toolbox.
After assessing the necklace, the man approached Baron Brignais,

set the necklace on the table, and whispered, "It's fake."
Instantly, all the thugs present drew their revolvers.
Baron Brignais observed Lumian, who appeared unfazed by the appraiser's declaration or the thugs' actions.
His grin never wavered as he nodded to the appraiser, "You may leave."
"Yes, Baron." The appraiser hurriedly exited the café.
Baron Brignais set down his mahogany pipe, playing with the diamond ring on his left hand. He asked Lumian, still smiling, "Were you aware this necklace was counterfeit?"
Lumian smiled as well.
"Indeed."
Before he could finish, the thugs aimed their revolvers at him.
Intrigued by Lumian's composure, Baron Brignais inquired, "Did you anticipate I'd have someone verify the necklace's authenticity?"
Lumian's grin remained steady.
"Indeed."
Baron Brignais's eyes narrowed.
"Knowing all this, why would you still attempt to borrow 1,000 verl d'or with a fake necklace?
"What makes you think I'd grant your request?"
Lumian slowly rose, disregarding the revolvers aimed at him. He placed his hands on the table's edge, leaned down to meet Baron Brignais's gaze, and smirked.
"Because I killed Margot of the Poison Spur Mob."
Baron Brignais's smile froze.
His pupils involuntarily dilated as if to scrutinize the man before him.
The four thugs, their revolvers aimed at Lumian, also reacted with shock.
As enemies of the Poison Spur Mob, they knew Margot's capabilities all too well.
Lumian's emotionless gaze scanned the thugs' faces, causing them to avert their eyes and, unconsciously, their weapons.
Baron Brignais recovered quickly, addressing the four thugs, "Holster your revolvers! Have I not taught you how to treat guests?"
Reprimanding his subordinates, he turned to Lumian, curiosity piqued, "How did you manage to kill Margot?"
"I stabbed him with something poisonous, but I don't know where he fled before succumbing," Lumian replied nonchalantly.
This aligned with the preliminary intel Baron Brignais had received. Eyes narrowing, he asked with a grin, "Do you understand the implications of taking my 1,000 verl d'or?"

Lumian smirked, unfazed.
"Indeed."
...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 504.
Upon seeing Lumian outside the door, Charlie eagerly inquired, "So, is it the real deal?"
"It's a fake. Worth no more than 50 verl d'or," Lumian casually replied as he entered the room.
He noticed that Charlie had already ripped off Susanna Mattise's portrait, leaving behind a sticky residue.
Charlie, having mentally braced himself for the outcome, was disappointed but not crushed. He chuckled self-deprecatingly, "Well, it's still worth 50 verl d'or at least. A generous pawnshop might give me 20 for it."
Lumian shot him a glance and grinned.
"But I managed to sell the fake necklace for 1,000 verl d'or."
"What?" Charlie was dumbstruck.
Lumian pulled out a thick wad of bills, still smiling.
"The fake necklace is yours and worth 50 verl d'or. That's all I can offer you. The rest is my fee for services rendered. Is that acceptable?"

Chapter 146: Turf

Charlie was dumbstruck and answered subconsciously, "No problem."
Only when Lumian laid out the 50 verl d'or notes did he snap back to reality. He cautiously peeked out the door.
The evening light was fading, and unlike the second floor, the fifth floor had large balconies on both sides, casting deep shadows. It was as if night had already descended.
Seeing the corridor empty, Charlie breathed a sigh of relief. He lowered his voice and asked Lumian, "You conned someone into buying the fake necklace for 1,000 verl d'or?"
"You've got two things wrong." Lumian grinned and handed the stack of 50 verl d'or notes to Charlie. "First, I didn't con just any person."
"Then who?" Charlie questioned, puzzled as he instinctively took the mix of 1 and 5 verl d'or notes.
Lumian's grin broadened.
"The Savoie Mob."
Hearing this, Charlie nearly dropped the banknotes in his hand.
He stared at Lumian in terror and blurted, "Are you insane?
"They kill people. Folks go missing all the time on Rue Anarchie!"
Lumian smirked and replied, "Second, it wasn't a con."
"What?" Charlie couldn't follow Lumian's logic.
Lumian clarified, still smiling, "They knew the necklace was a fake, yet they still forked over 1,000 verl d'or."
Impossible, Charlie thought, certain it was a joke.
The Savoie Mob might be ruthless, but they weren't idiots. Why would they pay 1,000 verl d'or for a fake necklace worth only 50 verl d'or?
Then, a wild thought crossed Charlie's mind.
"You didn't steal the leadership from the Savoie Mob, did you?"
That would be even more insane!
Lumian smirked again.
"Relax. Baron Brignais and I reached an agreement through a friendly conversation.
"Don't worry. There won't be any trouble in the future.
"So, do you want the 50 verl d'or or not?"
A friendly conversation with Baron Brignais... Charlie felt like he didn't know the man standing before him.
Considering his own financial situation, he took the 50 verl d'or and muttered,
"Thank you."
Lumian nodded with a smile and turned to go.

In that instant, Charlie grasped the whole picture and blurted out, "Did you join the Savoie Mob?"
Lumian didn't turn around. He waved his hand and replied, "That's right."
Charlie opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He watched Lumian's silhouette vanish into the darkness outside and disappear down the shadowy staircase.
...
Upon returning to Room 207, Lumian, fresh out of his disguise and ready to hunt for a tasty meal, caught a familiar curse coming from the fourth floor.
"If you think this money is easy, you can lie down and earn it yourself!"
"Useless coward. A dickless wretch; all you dare to do is bully women!"
"Send your mother to me if you dare!"
"..."
Lumian listened for a few seconds and quickly deduced that Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob had come to Ethans with his crew to collect "protection money."
A grin spread across his face.
In the next instant, Lumian donned a dark-blue cap, left Room 207, and made his way to the fourth floor.
Before he could reach Room 408, he heard the sharp crack of a slap followed by Ethans's even more vehement cursing and struggle.
The tenants on this floor shut their wooden doors tight, not daring to step out.
With one hand in his pocket, Lumian arrived outside Room 408. The first thing he noticed was the presence of two goons.
They were clad in dark jackets, blocking the doorway.
At this moment, Ethans's curses blended with sobs and screams.
"You sons of bitches!
"I curse you!
"I'll rip off your dicks!"
Lumian raised an eyebrow and approached the two thugs at the door.
"What do you want?" one of them barked.
Lumian didn't reply. Instead, he took a sudden step forward, reaching out to grab them.
His movements were so swift that he had the two thugs by the back of their heads before they could react.
Lumian applied force, slamming their skulls together.
With a sickening thud, their foreheads bulged, eyes rolled back, and they crumpled to the ground.

As they "cleared the way," Lumian glimpsed the scene inside the room.
Ethans, her flaxen hair and delicate features in disarray, lay on the bed. Her dress was torn, her face visibly bruised and swollen.
Wilson, his curly brown hair and deeply creased face sneering, was pocketing a stack of banknotes. His belt unbuckled, another thug was holding Ethans down.
Sensing the disturbance at the door, the Poison Spur Mob leader swiftly reached for his belt and glanced outside.
There he saw Lumian, casually wiping his hands and stepping over his two fallen comrades.
Not giving Wilson a chance to speak, Lumian grinned and said, "Didn't anyone tell you that Auberge du Coq Doré is now under the Savoie Mob's protection..."
Mid-sentence, he lunged forward, throwing a punch before Wilson could fasten his belt.
Wilson hastily dodged and buckled his belt.
Simultaneously, his eyes narrowed as they locked onto Lumian.
Lumian suddenly felt a wave of fear.
It was the unbridled fear of an ordinary person facing a villain or a thug. Wilson had manifested such emotions!
Yet, even as an ordinary person, Lumian wasn't cowed by villains who wouldn't dare to fight back. As a vagrant, he had always believed in fleeing and surrendering if possible. If not, he'd drag the other party down with him. Now, as a Sequence 8 Beyonder, he was even more fearless.
Another Beyonder? Lumian harnessed the intensity of his fear to grapple with Wilson and unleash his close-quarters combat skills.
His hands, elbows, knees, and feet transformed into weapons, overpowering Wilson, who had barely buckled his belt.
As the sounds of their struggle filled the air, another thug sprang into action. He grabbed a chair in the room, poised to smash it into Lumian's back.
But Lumian twisted his upper body like a serpent, circling behind Wilson.
Bang! The chair struck Wilson's head, sending him reeling.
With a crash, the already unstable chair splintered.
Lumian coiled his body like a spring and lifted his right leg.
His heel struck the thug's lower abdomen with pinpoint accuracy, eliciting a muffled groan.
The thug's eyes bulged as he clutched his crotch and crumpled to the floor. He writhed in pain but couldn't make a sound, like a rooster with its neck throttled.
As Lumian's right foot swung back, his arm lashed forward,

whipping Wilson's chest.
Unable to dodge, Wilson heard the crack of his ribs breaking.
Before he could recover from the pain, Lumian seized his arms and yanked him closer.
Pfft!
A knee to the chest greeted him.
Wilson's face paled, and his body doubled over.
Lumian clenched his fists and hammered Wilson's back.
Plop! Wilson collapsed to the ground.
Lumian capitalized on the opportunity, pouncing on him. He pinned Wilson's arms behind his back and pressed his knees into his spine.
"I thought you were quite the tough guy," Lumian taunted. "Turns out, you couldn't even last ten seconds."
Based on his assessment, Wilson was only at Sequence 9, a Sequence that focused more on combat and physical enhancement. However, he wasn't sure which pathway he belonged to.
Wilson, provoked and enraged, struggled with all his might but couldn't break free from Lumian's grip.
Lumian glanced up at the dumbstruck Ethans and chuckled at Wilson and the incapacitated thugs.
"Go back and tell your bosses that this is Ciel's turf. If you've got any business, feel free to look for our Savoie Mob!"
"You're a dead man!" Wilson snarled.
Lumian smirked, retorting, "I'm not sure if I'll die, but you're the one dying now."
"You dare to kill me in front of so many witnesses?" Wilson mocked.
Lumian said nothing. He tightened his grip, and a sickening crack echoed in the room.
Wilson let out a spine-chilling scream, beads of cold sweat the size of beans breaking out on his forehead.
His arm was broken!
Lumian hoisted him up and leaped onto Ethans's wooden table. He pushed open the window and dangled Wilson over the outer wall.
Glancing down at the deserted alley, Lumian smiled at Wilson and taunted, "Try guessing. Do you think I dare to throw you down?"
Wilson stared at the cobblestones more than ten meters below and recalled how resolute the other party had been when he said he'd break his arm. For a moment, he didn't dare answer.
Just then, Lumian released his grip.
I haven't answered yet! Wilson's body plunged downward in sheer terror.

With no other option, he desperately tried to adjust his posture to protect his vitals.
Crash!
He hit the ground with a sickening thud, his flesh instantly mangled in multiple places.
Lumian observed for a couple of seconds before chuckling.
"Quite a tough one. You're still alive. Is your nickname Rue Anarchie Cockroach?"
Ignoring Wilson, he jumped off the wooden table and addressed the three thugs struggling to their feet, "Did you hear what I just said?"
The three thugs nodded fearfully and turned to flee.
"Wait," Lumian called out to them.
The three thugs froze on the spot, their bodies trembling slightly.
Lumian gestured at the shattered chair and grinned.
"Aren't you going to compensate for the damage?"
The three thugs hastily pulled out all the banknotes they had and tossed them on the floor.
With Lumian's nod of approval, they stumbled out of Room 408.
Ethans stared blankly the entire time, only recalling the words that this place had been taken over by the Savoie Mob.
Then, she realized that Ciel from the Savoie Mob hadn't informed her about how much she should pay or how often she should pay in the future. He didn't even glance at her as he walked straight to the door.
Ethans instinctively opened her mouth, wanting to ask something, but she hesitated, fearing the Poison Spur Mob might retaliate. She watched Lumian's figure vanish into the darkness beyond the door.

Chapter 147: Reaction

Lumian had just returned to the second floor when he spotted Charlie lingering outside his door.

"Hey, don't tell me you had another dream? You make me nervous, just popping up at my door like that," Lumian teased with a hint of mockery.

He couldn't shake the fact that Charlie had sought him out rather than heading directly to the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.

Charlie glanced at the stairs and lowered his voice.

"Something happened on the fourth floor?"

"You've got good ears," Lumian commended. "There was an incident. I tossed Wilson down the block."

"Huh?" Charlie appeared bewildered once more.

It took him a moment to process.

"Which Wilson? The one from the Poison Spur Mob who collects money from Miss Ethans?"

"Yes." Lumian nodded candidly.

At first, Charlie's expression read, "I see." Then, he blurted out in shock, "You threw him down the block? From which floor?"

"Fourth floor," Lumian replied, grinning.

Charlie's mouth fell open, forgetting to close it.

"You're not joking, are you?" he asked nervously after a few seconds.

Lumian gestured toward the room across the hall.

"If you don't believe me, take a look at the alley behind. That guy's like a cockroach; he didn't die from the fall."

"..." Charlie assessed Lumian anew, as though seeing him for the first time. He realized that his mischievous, audacious, and clever friend possessed a side he didn't grasp at all.

In Lumian's eyes, there seemed to be no law, and a chilling coldness ran deep within him. Fear was absent from his mind, and he had genuinely thrown a living person from the fourth floor. Moreover, he was a leader of the Poison Spur Mob!

Wasn't he afraid of dying?

Wasn't he afraid of the Poison Spur Mob's retaliation?

This brought to mind how Ciel had held a dirk to his throat when Susanna Mattise threatened him.

Charlie had always assumed it was primarily a threat and intimidation tactic, but he now suspected that, had Susanna Mattise not been willing to yield, Ciel might have truly stabbed him.

Of course, his weapon wouldn't have been some Cursed Blade.

The next second, Charlie glanced around and lowered his voice

again.
"A-are you out of your mind? The Poison Spur Mob isn't to be trifled with!
"Why don't you move away? You should be safe once you leave the market district."
He felt that no matter how reckless Ciel was or how little he respected the law, he was someone who had genuinely helped him. He had to warn him of the danger so he could escape swiftly.
Lumian smirked and shot back, "Our Savoie Mob isn't to be trifled with either."
"Uh..." Charlie suddenly sensed that the situation might not be as he'd imagined.
Lumian opened the door to Room 207 and declared as he entered,
"From now on, Auberge du Coq Doré is our Savoie Mob's turf. I'll throw out anyone from the Poison Spur Mob who shows up."
Had the Savoie Mob enlisted Ciel to handle Wilson? Charlie came to a realization and felt a mixture of relief.
Since the Savoie Mob had instigated the confrontation, they surely had a plan to counter the Poison Spur Mob's retaliation. A broke, jobless guy like him needn't worry.
Lumian snapped the suitcase shut, concealing a few sets of clothes and Aurore's grimoire within. He slid it under the bed and draped a blanket over it. Straightening up, he instructed Charlie,
"If anyone comes looking for me, tell them I went to the Salle de Bal Brise."
"A-alright." Charlie watched as Lumian vanished down the stairs, a sudden realization hitting him.
What would become of Miss Ethans after this?
Would she be claimed by the Savoie Mob, or was there still a chance for her to redeem herself?
...
Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.
Lumian perched at the bar counter, tapping his fingers on the surface.
"One glass of Lover, a serving of mashed potatoes, veal slices in lard, a pork sausage, and a croissant."
Lover referred to a sugar alcohol brewed from sugarcane syrup, served with ice and water. It was common slang in Intis bars.
Soon enough, Lumian sipped the amber-hued, sweet alcohol and savored the aromatic veal slices.
As he relished the delicacies and listened to the music from the dance floor, his body swayed rhythmically.
Just then, one of Baron Brignais' gang members sidled up beside him.

Lumian turned to the man, noticing the blood clots on his forehead. He smiled and said, "This is our third encounter, right? What should I call you?"
The thug replied cautiously, "Just call me Louis."
Another Louis... Lumian mused.
In the Intis Republic, Louis was as common a name as Pierre and Guillaume. The last Louis Lumian had met had given birth to a child, despite being a man.
Louis watched Lumian take a bite of the croissant and offered casually, as if trying to build rapport, "This one's on me. It's your first time at our Salle de Bal Brise."
"Alright." Lumian didn't bother with pretenses.
Louis ordered a syrupy lemon soda alcohol dubbed Demon and took a sip.
"You live at Auberge du Coq Doré, right?"
"Yeah." Lumian grabbed a piece of sausage and popped it into his mouth.
Louis pondered for a moment before asking, "That's Poison Spur Mob territory. Want to move to Rue des Blouses Blanches?"
"No need." Lumian sipped his ice-cold Lover, its caramel scent wafting through the air, and grinned. "It's now our Savoie Mob's turf."
"What?" Louis nearly choked on his drink.
Lumian swiveled his head and smirked.
"I tossed Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob off the fourth floor. Auberge du Coq Doré is now Savoie Mob turf."
Hearing Lumian's account, Louis's face gradually stiffened.
After a few seconds, he forced a smile and stood up.
"I need to report this to the baron."
Why is this guy even more brutal and unhinged than the baron?
"Alright." Lumian didn't care.
Louis took a few brisk steps before turning back, leaning in to whisper, "Is Wilson dead?"
"No." Lumian feigned regret.
What are you regretting? Louis studied Lumian's face, suddenly wondering: Did we gain a weapon or a massive problem?
...
Avenue du Marché, Unit 126, inside Roger's three-story building with a modest garden.
As the injured Wilson was carried past him, Roger's icy blue eyes scanned the three trembling thugs and he demanded, "Who did this?"
"Someone from the Savoie Mob!" A thug answered hastily, slightly hunched. "He calls himself Ciel and says that the Auberge du Coq

Doré now belongs to the Savoie Mob!"
Ciel... Black Scorpion Roger's somewhat plump face registered a mix of confusion and wariness.
He murmured to himself, "There's no Ciel among the top brass of the Savoie Mob... How did he manage to thrash Wilson like this?"
It was worth noting that Wilson was a Villain, equivalent to a Sequence 9 Beyonder—a master of combat!
At that moment, another thug spoke up speculatively, "Boss, I remember something. We went to Auberge du Coq Doré the night Margot was killed."
Roger's expression darkened, a fierce hatred seeping in.
"Was that also Ciel's doing? How did he pull it off?
"Did the Savoie Mob secretly recruit such a formidable figure to drive us out of the market district?"
A man standing beside Black Scorpion Roger spat hatefully, "First, an assassination; now, an open taunt. If we don't retaliate, who knows what'll come next!"
The man had a shaved head but boasted striking features. His lake-blue eyes, high nose bridge, thick brown eyebrows, and curved lips rendered him handsome despite his baldness.
Dressed in a black shirt, dark breeches, and strapless leather boots, he forewent a coat and stood nearly 1.8 meters tall.
Roger pondered for a few seconds before instructing the man beside him,
"Haman, go to Baron Brignais and find out what's going on. Ask if the Savoie Mob intends to wage an all-out war against our Poison Spur Mob."
"If they're open to reconciliation, we can make appropriate concessions.
"Remember, learn to endure—the time isn't right yet."
...
On the balcony of a third-floor room in Salle de Bal Brise.
Baron Brignais leisurely puffed on his peach-colored pipe, observing the guests entering and exiting the dance hall.
Suddenly, he turned his gaze towards the door.
Two seconds later, Louis pushed open the door, entering the balcony and stepping past the other thugs.
"Your footsteps are a bit heavy and hurried. Something happen?" Baron Brignais inquired with a smile.
Louis replied anxiously, "Baron, Ciel threw Wilson off the fourth floor of the Auberge du Coq Doré!"
"Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob?" Baron Brignais recalled, seeking confirmation.
"Yes, he's severely injured but not dead," Louis quickly added.

Baron Brignais held his pipe, pondering for a moment before asking, "Did Ciel mention why he did that?"
"He said that the Auberge du Coq Doré is now our Savoie Mob's turf," Louis repeated Lumian's words.
Baron Brignais couldn't help but chuckle.
Taking a drag from his pipe, he spoke with a hint of meaning, "If you don't handle a sharp weapon properly, it's easy to hurt yourself. I'll have to find an opportunity to give him some 'guidance.'
"What should we do about the Poison Spur Mob? Should we inform the Boss?" Louis asked, concerned.
Baron Brignais considered for a moment and responded, "Not for now.
"Ciel actually performed well this time. I'm curious to see how the Poison Spur Mob reacts."
Noticing his subordinate's puzzled expression, Baron Brignais—always fond of 'educating' them to showcase his intelligence—smiled and explained, "Since the Poison Spur Mob's inception, their number of Beyonders has swelled, nearly matching ours in just under two years. They've seized a significant amount of territory. Don't you see a major issue here?
"Give them another two years, and we might be completely driven out of the market district.
"If they want to escalate this matter, I'm more than willing. It's a prime opportunity for the authorities to take notice and uncover who's backing them."

Chapter 148: "Lord of the Motel"

At 10 p.m., while returning to Auberge du Coq Doré from Avenue du Marché, Louis, who was with Baron Brignais earlier, guided Lumian from the main road bathed in yellow light to a side street swallowed by darkness.

Surveying the neglected, broken street lamps, he remarked nonchalantly, "The baron has cut a deal with the Poison Spur Mob. From now on, Auberge du Coq Doré is officially under our Savoie Mob's control."

Lumian snorted. "Is the Poison Spur Mob that easy to negotiate with?"

What do you mean? Are you hoping for the two parties to fight? Louis increasingly sensed that Ciel was a dangerous man who thrived on conflict.

He was convinced that Ciel's nature and approach would bring trouble to the Savoie Mob time and time again in the future.

The market district, already strained by the Poison Spur Mob's rapid ascent, would certainly become more chaotic.

As a seasoned gang member, Louis believed in bullying ordinary people rather than resorting to violence and bloodshed. Life was precious; he'd witnessed several comrades die in gang wars and police raids. Initially, their families were taken care of, but as time passed, their circumstances deteriorated.

But if cornered, Louis wouldn't shy away from brutality. Every thug under Baron Brignais had climbed the ranks through street brawls and alley fights. They may not be brainy, but their skills and courage were nothing to sneer at.

Louis slowly exhaled.

"You showed enough force to protect Auberge du Coq Doré, and the Poison Spur Mob didn't want to escalate matters and draw police attention. So, after the baron covered Wilson's medical expenses, the matter was settled.

"Keep a low profile for now. If you catch the police's eye, you won't withstand a thorough investigation."

It doesn't matter to me. I'll just find a hideout before the official Beyonders corner me. The Poison Spur Mob can run, but they can't hide... Lumian murmured, borrowing a line from Aurore's book.

Louis continued, "The baron wants me to tell you that since you're staying at Auberge du Coq Doré, it's your turf now.

"And for members who control their own turf, we don't usually provide daily allowances."

What he implied was that the Savoie Mob likely wouldn't give Lumian any more money beyond the initial 1,000 verl d'or. He'd

have to find a way to generate income from his turf.
Lumian was momentarily stunned before replying with a chuckle, "Alright."
As they spoke, they stopped outside Auberge du Coq Doré.
Lumian gazed at the old, cream-colored building and was struck by a bizarre, ludicrous thought.
This is my turf?
The residents of this ramshackle place are all destitute. *How can they afford to pay protection fees?*
Forget it. It's already a blessing that they don't create trouble for me like Charlie. I can't squeeze money out of them!
Muttering silently, Lumian bid Louis farewell and entered the motel.
Having already consumed two drinks, he skipped the basement bar and retreated to Room 207.
No one had visited.
After perusing Aurore's grimoire for a while, Lumian recognized a familiar footfall, followed by a knock on the door.
He opened it, unsurprised to find Charlie standing there.
Charlie's face was flushed from drinking. He grinned and exclaimed, "Can you believe it? I'm about to land a new job! I went to Rue des Blouses Blanches tonight and bought the waiters drinks. They introduced me to a hotel manager who said they needed a few full-time attendants!"
"If that manager learns you hooked up with a female guest at your previous hotel and were recently implicated in a murder case, will he still consider you?" Lumian retorted.
Charlie's smile froze. He massaged his face and replied, "He might still give me a chance. But Ciel, that's not why I'm here. I wanted to ask what you plan to do with Miss Ethans?"
"What do you mean?" Lumian inquired, smirking.
Charlie forced a smile and asked,"Will you stop her from leaving Rue Anarchie? If you make her keep working the streets, how much should she pay you each time? And how often?"
Lumian chortled.
"She's free to do whatever she wants. It's none of my business. I have plenty of ways to make money."
"I knew it! Praise the Sun and Saint Vième!" Charlie cheered. "I could tell from the moment I saw you at the bar that you were a clever and capable gentleman!"
"Trusting the judgment of the Idiot Instrument?" Lumian jested.
Charlie sheepishly smiled.
"That's one factor."
He waved his hand.

"I'll share this news with Miss Ethans!" After taking a few steps, Charlie halted and spun around, asking unusually cautiously, "Will the Poison Spur Mob come back?"
"Baron Brignais has brokered a deal with them. Auberge du Coq Doré is now Savoie Mob's turf," Lumian answered nonchalantly. "And I'm the one in charge here."
Charlie was ecstatic. He spread his arms wide and exclaimed, "Praise the Sun, praise Saint Vième, and praise you, Ciel!"
With that, he dashed into the stairwell.
Comparing me to the Eternal Blazing Sun and Saint Vième... Are you trying to get me killed faster? Lumian snorted and shook his head.
He then retreated to his room and resumed studying Aurore's grimoire.
Outside Room 408, Charlie knocked on the wooden door.
Ethans, her cheek red and swollen, opened the door and stated flatly, "I'm not feeling well today. Find someone else."
Charlie couldn't contain the exciting news.
"Guess what? The motel's no longer under Poison Spur Mob's control. It belongs to the Savoie Mob!"
Ethans suddenly remembered the evening's events and hesitated before asking, "Are you sure?"
"Absolutely!" Charlie replied, his signature enthusiasm returning. "You won't believe it. I found out from the leader of the Savoie Mob. Ciel, who lives in 207. He's already become a leader of the Savoie Mob. Auberge du Coq Doré is his turf now! He personally told me that the Poison Spur Mob bastards have scrammed and won't be back! He also said that the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob reached an agreement!"
Ciel... The man who threw Wilson down? Ethans's eyes darted, seemingly awakening from her puppet-like state.
"The Poison Spur Mob was really driven away?"
"It's true!" Charlie nodded emphatically.
Ethans stood stunned for a moment, then clenched her teeth and spat out, "Those sons of bitches, rotten scum, they're finally gone!"
Charlie continued, "I've asked Ciel. He said you can do whatever you want. It's not his concern. He's incredibly resourceful. So much so that he can change my opinion of pranksters like him. Can you believe it? He comes up with lucrative schemes every minute!"
Ethans was dumbstruck.
As far as she knew, none of the gangsters were good people. They were all despicable scoundrels who deserved hell!
Charlie kept talking, but Ethans tuned him out. The words "do whatever you want" resonated in her mind.
After Charlie left, she retreated to her room and quickly changed

into a lady's blouse and light-colored pants.
Next, she lifted the mattress and retrieved a stack of 200 verl d'or notes.
She crammed all the bills into her pocket, then hesitated for a moment before removing more than half and hiding it back in its original spot.
With the remaining 40 verl d'or, she shut the door and headed downstairs.
Before long, she stepped out of Auberge du Coq Doré and onto Rue Anarchie.
A solitary gas lamp illuminated the street from a distance. Bathed in crimson moonlight, numerous inebriated people stumbled along the road, shouting, singing, or sporadically clashing with one another.
Ethans sidestepped the drunks and nervously followed the shadows along the street, aiming for Rue Anarchie's exit.
Throughout her journey, memories of escaping and being apprehended by the Poison Spur Mob on the street haunted her.
The memory of the beating made her shudder involuntarily.
Ethans slowed down, as though the Poison Spur Mob lurked around the corner.
Finally, she reached the exit of Rue Anarchie and saw the broad main road beyond.
Ethans stared at the once-unreachable scene, feeling as if she were in a dream.
Subconsciously, she quickened her pace, striding faster through the dark night under the crimson moonlight.
In no time, she arrived at the nearest public carriage stop.
She still remembered disembarking from the public carriage here on her first day in Trier.
Now, she had finally returned.
With no public carriages running late at night, Ethans didn't mind.
She gazed at the street ahead, the postbox shrouded in darkness, and the sign displaying the carriage route. Her eyes welled up with tears.
Suddenly, Ethans spun around and bolted.
She had to get back to Auberge du Coq Doré, pack her belongings, and leave at daybreak!
Ethans sprinted faster, feeling the wind slap her face, cold and damp.
Her vision blurred, and she seemed to see a ghost of her past self.
The former Ethans, who arrived in Trier filled with dreams and enthusiasm, stood beneath the streetlamp, gently beckoning.
Hurry up and catch up!

...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Ethans dabbed the corners of her eyes and rapped on the door.
Lumian swung the wooden door open and cast a cursory glance at her.
"What can I do for you?"
In a raspy voice, Ethans inquired, "Why are you helping me?"
Lumian sneered. "Why should I help you? What do you possess that's worthy of my assistance? You're not beautiful, and you don't have much money."
Ethans's words of gratitude were immediately choked off.
She couldn't even recall how she left the second floor. As she packed her belongings, the whole experience felt surreal.
Watching her vanish down the stairs, Lumian snickered.
I'm not helping you. I just can't stand fate's cruel taunts.
We are all victims of fate's ridicule, but I want to defy and resist it, even if I'm not capable enough, until death puts an end to it all!
In that moment, Lumian sensed his Provoker potion digesting a bit further.
Although he was far from fully digesting it and needed time to work through it, this indicated that he had adapted to the Provoker potion, and his condition had stabilized. He could contemplate extracting the sealed power within him and obtaining the Alms Monk's boon.
Judging by the name, it should compensate for his lack of mystical techniques.

Chapter 149: Five Ritualistic Spells

Lumian wasn't eager to perform the ritual just yet. For one, he had been swamped all day and was far from his peak condition. He needed rest, or at least to wait until he reset at six in the morning. Secondly, the ritual involved two hidden entities and a corruption that had trapped a village in a time loop. If something went awry, it wasn't just the Auberge du Coq Doré that could be in jeopardy—the entire Rue Anarchie might face destruction. Who knew how many lives would be lost?

Thus, Lumian planned to head underground after daybreak, seeking a secluded quarry cave to serve as the ritual site.

As for the materials, he had already brought them from Cordu.

Rue Anarchie's nights were seldom peaceful, but Lumian managed to sleep well, practically dreamless. He awoke early to the sound of cathedral bells.

Rising slowly, he washed up and headed to a café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. His breakfast consisted of plum pie, savarin, and a café au lait with plenty of milk.

Delicacies always lifted one's spirits, and the Auberge du Coq Doré was no longer under the Poison Spur Mob's thumb. Lumian gradually adjusted to his optimal state.

With renewed purpose, he returned to Room 207, intending to gather the necessary materials and carbide lamp for his venture into Underground Trier.

Just as Lumian finished preparing and was about to leave, he heard a soft knock on the door.

Confused, he opened it to find Anthony Reid standing outside, clad in military-green attire and strapless leather boots.

The forty-something information broker stroked his short blond hair and said to Lumian, "I got something."

The padre or Madame Pualis and her underlings? Lumian stepped aside, allowing Anthony Reid to enter the room.

Anthony scanned the surroundings, Lumian's reflection caught in his dark brown eyes.

Simultaneously, Lumian felt an all-too-familiar unease.

Suppressing his thoughts, he inquired, "What are they?"

Anthony Reid gave a slight nod before replying, "Someone spotted a man suspected to be Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché, the one you believe to be Madame Pualis' butler."

On Avenue du Marché? Lumian's excitement surged.

Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, and I are so close?

"Are you sure?" he asked urgently.

Anthony Reid shook his head.

"I'm not sure. I'm just here to let you know that I haven't forgotten your task. When I'm certain it's really Louis Lund, I'll collect the balance from you."
"My money can't wait to part with me." Lumian made no effort to conceal his eagerness.
After seeing Anthony Reid off, his resolve to obtain the Alms Monk's boon only intensified.
...
The blue glow of the carbide lamp pierced the darkness, unveiling the street between stone pillars to Lumian.
A chilly wind whispered through the tunnels, leaving faint traces of moisture on the stone walls above.
Navigating the subterranean streets and alleys, Lumian discovered a passage that led even deeper.
Utilizing a Hunter's innate ability to memorize environments, he descended until he finally reached a quarry hollow, roughly the size of two or three Auberge du Coq Dorés.
Sparse white mushrooms grew in the rock crevices.
Charlie had mentioned that many people in Rue Anarchie and the surrounding areas scoured these underground quarries for mushrooms to bolster their income and meals. Trier mushrooms had become synonymous with these fungi, but the specimens here were clearly natural.
Lumian circled the cave twice, inspecting it thoroughly.
Satisfied that there were no issues, he found a half-meter-tall stone and placed the blood-infused musk candle on it. The other candle was positioned closer to him.
Having tidied the area, Lumian lit the two grayish-white candles in the order of top to bottom—divine before mortal—by channeling his spirituality.
Next, he drew the ritual silver dagger and swiftly sanctified it, erecting a barrier of spirituality.
Unlike the last time he had prayed for the Dancer's power, Lumian's spirituality remained plentiful after completing these tasks. He effortlessly entered a somewhat ethereal state, enabling him to perform rituals without the aid of incense.
He exhaled slowly, picked up the gray amber perfume on the altar, and dripped it into the deity-representing candle.
As the scent sizzled, a sweet, elegant fragrance filled the air, calming his nerves.
After the gray amber perfume came tulip powder. As a strange aroma permeated the spiritual barrier, Lumian took two steps back, gazed at the flickering candle flame, and bellowed in ancient Hermes,

"Power of Inevitability!"
A howling gust swept through the chamber, causing the deity-representing candle's orange flame to quiver. It hung by a thread, threatening to go out at any moment.
In the dimming light, Lumian's left chest seared with pain, accompanied by a wave of dizziness.
Once again, he heard the enigmatic sound that seemed to originate from an infinite distance, yet felt close at hand. However, it wasn't loud enough to engulf him in agony.
Lumian continued chanting the subsequent incantations in ancient Hermes.
"You are the past, the present, and the future;
"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."
Within the spiritual barrier, an invisible wind turned pitch black as a faint gray fog filled the space.
Rocks and bottles warped and twisted, appearing as malleable objects.
Silently, the deity-representing candle's flame swelled to the size of a fist, shimmering silver-white with a hint of black.
Granules emerged on Lumian's skin and on the rocks, writhing and stretching, poised to burst forth at any moment.
The terrifying sound filled his ears, drowning out all else. His head spun, threatening to make him vomit.
His thoughts wavered between disarray and chaos as he barely finished reciting the incantation.
As Lumian spoke the final words, the silver-black candle flame contracted into a beam of light that struck his left chest.
Silver-black phantasmal liquid flowed out, enveloping Lumian's body as though it possessed its own life and will.
Lumian had already steeled himself for the onslaught. In his uncontrollable frustration, he felt a prickling pain erupting all over his body. As the piercing ravings seemed to saw through his skull, a burning sensation flared within him.
He collapsed, curling up and enduring the agony with gritted teeth.
All he could do was struggle to maintain the "boat" of rationality amidst the tempestuous waves of pain.
Throughout the ordeal, he was tempted several times to surrender to the malevolent thoughts gnawing at his heart. He longed to merge with the pain, to escape the torture. However, the lingering elegant and sweet fragrance in his nostrils caused his ruthlessness and frustration to ebb and flow repeatedly.
Ultimately, Lumian felt as if his body and mind ceased to exist, leaving only a sense of rational spirituality.
As the pain and ravings began to subside, he realized he had

endured.
Lumian lay motionless on the cold ground, not willing to move for an extended period.
After what felt like an eternity, he mustered enough strength to hastily end the ritual and clean up the altar, warding off any potential mishaps.
Having dealt with these matters, Lumian sat on the stone that had served as the altar and scrutinized the changes within himself.
Soon, he muttered, My tolerance for extreme environments has increased a bit... Heh, guess I won't need to buy winter and summer clothes anymore?
Beyond this, Lumian discovered another newfound intuition.
An intuition for luck!
He could roughly sense the recent fortunes of others—good luck, bad luck, potential for disaster, romantic opportunities, and so on—but he couldn't discern the precise details.
In other words, Lumian could detect that someone was experiencing bad luck, but had no way of knowing how unlucky they would be or how long their misfortune would last.
"Truly worthy of a monk with the power of inevitability," Lumian couldn't help but sigh, feeling he could entirely replace Osta Trul as a diviner for others.
Although ignorant about divination, wouldn't he be able to fabricate the corresponding words when he could glimpse the rough strokes of someone's fortune?
Moreover, Lumian acquired an abundance of sacrificial knowledge and five ritualistic spells in his mind.
The former compensated for his many shortcomings in the realm of mysticism, while the latter augmented his repertoire of mystical techniques.
The five ritualistic spells were Animal Creation Spell, Prophecy Spell, Luck Enhancement Spell, Substitution Spell, and Exorcism Spell.
Through ritualistic magic, the Animal Creation Spell utilized sheepskin, cowhide, and other animal hides to morph the target on the altar into the corresponding creature. This could also be applied to Lumian himself. As long as he mastered the incantation to break the curse or waited for the ritual to end, he could revert to human form. While transformed into an animal, he would be unable to speak or wield most of his Beyonder powers.
The Prophecy Spell was entirely different from what Lumian had envisioned. The process involved gathering ingredients such as a snake's venom sac and a rock from an eagle's nest. Using ritualistic magic, one could concoct an unusual concoction. Next,

one had to find a corpse dead for less than seven days and not yet cremated or purified. Pouring the concoction into the corpse's mouth would momentarily revive it, allowing the caster to ask three questions about the future.

The Luck Enhancement Spell employed ritualistic magic to create an object linked to one's misfortune. By sending the object away and having others open, consume, step on, or wear it, the caster could transfer their bad luck onto them, thus enhancing their own luck.

The Substitution Spell was even more intricate, and Lumian suspected it was a lower-tier reflection of a Fate Appropriator's abilities. For example, if he wished to evade Susanna Mattise, he would need to find a vagrant and make them live as Ciel for a while. During this period, the vagrant would have to stay in Room 207, use all of Lumian's money, and gain recognition from Charlie and other acquaintances to establish sufficient mystical connections before performing the ritual to complete the substitution.

Upon the ritual's completion, Susanna Mattise would seek vengeance on the vagrant rather than Lumian.

Of course, Lumian wasn't certain he could deceive Susanna Mattise, who was on the verge of becoming a demigod, with a Sequence 8 Substitution Spell. He even doubted whether the ritualistic magic would succeed at all.

Chapter 150: Voice

When Lumian first gained the mysticism knowledge, he had placed high hopes on the Exorcism Spell. It appeared to be the perfect solution to deal with Susanna Mattise—provided she hadn't been entirely wiped out by the official Beyonders.

But it was only upon truly grasping the Exorcism Spell did Lumian come to the sobering realization that his jubilation had been premature.

The ritualistic spell was capable of banishing wraiths and even evil spirits, preventing them from tormenting a soul. But it came with two caveats. First, he needed to know the specter's real name and possess a personal item she'd held dear in life. Second, he needed ample time to conduct the ritual.

That second condition meant the Exorcism Spell was a no-go in the heat of battle. It was better suited for situations like Charlie's, haunted by constant dreams of Susanna Mattise, plagued by wraiths or evil spirits, but not on the brink of death.

Lumian, however, hadn't been physically hurt by Susanna Mattise, just targeted. The Exorcism Spell needed a victim, and without one, he couldn't banish her.

When Susanna Mattise made her next move, Lumian knew she wouldn't be playing nice. She'd leech his energy through erotic dreams, leading him slowly but surely towards his demise. Given her prior displays of venom and paranoia, she was sure to strike directly, unleashing her supernatural arsenal to kill on contact.

In such a scenario, Lumian wouldn't have a chance to wield the Exorcism Spell unless someone could buy him a few minutes.

Should I turn to the official Beyonders for help? But that would expose me to the authorities, causing a world of trouble down the line...

Or perhaps Charlie could play the martyr, soothing Susanna Mattise with heartfelt words of love, buying time in the flesh? The longer he held out, the better Lumian's odds of completing the Exorcism Spell... Heh heh, a bizarre thought that's like underground literature, Lumian mused quietly.

Though the current mantra of the Intis Republic was 'freedom,' it was a far cry from true liberty.

On the one hand, they wanted to quash the nostalgia of Roselle's followers and the Carbonari's revolutionary impulses. Opposition threatened the ruling party's authority. On the other hand, they faced the traditionalist Church of the God of Steam and Machinery and the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun. The Intis Republic's censorship of publications was heavy-handed.

They'd even plant spies or groom authors as double agents to keep an eye on influential content creators, ensuring they didn't tarnish the ruling party's image or produce content deemed too explicit or blasphemous for the wider readership.
But with every prohibition came violations. Trier spawned a thriving underground literary scene that reached beyond its borders.
Aurore once, driven by curiosity, bought a few such books. She forbade her brother from reading them and tucked them away in the bookcase's darkest corner. But prohibition bred violation. Lumian had snuck a peek at one and was taken aback.
The book was a critique of the clergy's indulgence and corruption, peppered with erotic content. It was titled 'Monks Chasing Dogs.'
Lumian's plan to use Charlie as bait for Susanna Mattise had a certain subversive literature charm to it.
Then again, I don't have any of Susanna Mattise's personal items to use as a conduit. I could try to hunt down something in the coming days. Regardless of whether it ends up being useful, it's better to be prepared than caught unawares... Lumian shook off his reverie, considering the potential of the other four ritualistic spells and their relevance to him.
To Lumian, the Animal Creation Spell seemed mystical, malevolent, uncanny, and downright horrifying.
If utilized right, it could work wonders. Imagine turning captives into sheep, cows, horses, and just walking away with them. Or infiltrating places no human could, in the form of a critter. But in the thick of a fight, this ritualistic spell was pretty much a dud.
According to the mysticism wisdom bestowed upon Lumian, the invocation for the Animal Creation Spell could be made to the hidden existence known as Inevitability, a host of honorific names unknown to him, or even himself.
Naturally, the prerequisite was ample spirituality and the corresponding rank. Also, the ritual's success rate and the spell's longevity were significantly lower than the previous methods.
The minimum requirement for the Animal Creation Spell was a Sequence 7 Contractee. The higher the rank, the better the chances of the spell working, and the more potent the effect.
With the corruption sealed within him, Lumian wasn't concerned about his rank. He was unsure, though, if his spirituality reserves could endure the consumption of the Animal Creation Spell. If they could, how many times could he bear it?
Besides the Animal Creation Spell, he himself could be the prayer target for the other four ritualistic spells. As for their success rates and impacts, that was a different matter.

This led Lumian to speculate that these five ritualistic spells could be simplified at higher ranks and deployed in real combat. For instance, he could simply drape an enemy in sheepskin, chant the preordained incantation, and transform them into sheep.
That doesn't seem plausible for a Contractee, equivalent to a Sequence 7. A Sequence 4 Circle Inhabitant is too lofty for such a rudimentary spell... Could a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator accommodate such a simplification, or is it a Sequence 6, the name of which escapes me? Lumian mused subconsciously.
As for the Luck Enhancement Spell, he felt it could only "assist" others at present, not himself. His destiny was deeply entwined with the corruption sealed within him and the great existence behind the seal. Unless he prayed directly to the power of Inevitability, altering his luck was a non-starter. Only when he ascended to the Fate Appropriator rank could he choose a fate unbound by those lofty beings.
The Substitution Spell was just too convoluted, and it would severely disrupt Lumian's routine and other tasks. He wouldn't consider it unless he was out of options.
Compared to that, the Prophecy Spell seemed like a piece of cake and rather handy as ritualistic magic went.
Lumian had already decided to gather the necessary intel and find a suitable corpse. By inquiring about Charlie's future, he could estimate when Susanna Mattise would strike next and locate Madame Pualis and the others by delving into Louis Lund's destiny.
Dog's drool, lynx innards, hyena tongue, stag bone marrow, sea or aquatic monster flesh, lizard eye, rock from an eagle's nest, snake venom gland, and deadly herbs. These ingredients aren't all that hard to come by. The only pain is the sea or aquatic monster flesh, but the ritual doesn't specify a rank. Technically, the feeblest aquatic monster still counts as an aquatic monster; it just impacts the effect, right? Lumian ruminated for a bit, noticing that his energy levels had considerably rebounded. He readied himself to leave the subterranean quarry cave and head back to Auberge du Coq Doré.
Just as he rose to his feet, a sudden furrow creased his brow.
A faint sound reached his ears.
The voice echoed inside his ears!
Lumian fought to steady his nerves, straining to discern the sound. With each passing moment, the voice grew clearer, more potent, more imposing.
"Lumian Lee!
"Lumian Lee!

"..."
It knows my name? Instinctively, Lumian swept the area with his carbide lamp, yet found no figure, nothing out of the ordinary.
"Lumian Lee!
"Lumian Lee!
"..."
The voice reverberated as if it were emanating from the very core of his being, muffled by his flesh, organs, and bones, creating overlapping echoes.
Inside my body... The thought struck Lumian the moment he made this realization.
In a hushed whisper, he asked, "Who are you?"
The deep, majestic, and spectral voice ceased its chant and solemnly declared, "I'm the Angel of the Lord, Termiboros."
"Lord? Which lord?" Lumian's eyes narrowed, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smirk.
He suspected the entity communicating was the corruption entombed within him. After receiving the Alms Monk's blessing and nearing the entity of Inevitability, it had managed to transmit a voice devoid of corruption via their intertwined powers.
The spectral voice echoing in Lumian's ears intoned reverently, "The Lord is the ruler of the Great Old Ones, the Essence Above the Sequences, the mighty Circle of Inevitability..."
Merely contemplating these words sent an inexplicable shiver down Lumian's spine. It felt as if a gaze had pierced the cosmos, the clouds, the surface-level Trier, layers of earth, and was fixed upon him.
Suddenly, Lumian found himself glancing over his shoulder, as if unseen entities were scrutinizing him from the enveloping darkness.
The sensation sent chills down his spine, sowing unease in his mind, threatening to unhinge him.
Out of nowhere, a faint gray fog materialized and shrouded the surroundings, significantly pacifying Lumian's agitated mind.
He sneered at the self-proclaimed Angel, Termiboros.
"So, you're the one sealed within me?"
I wonder if it's a bona fide Angel with Beyonder characteristics or just an Angel-tier servant boasting only a boon...
This insolence seemed to digest Lumian's potion further along its course.
Undeterred by Lumian's provocation, Termiboros continued solemnly, "Follow my instructions, break my seal, and I will aid you in resurrecting Aurore Lee.
"You should be well aware that my Lord's power spans the past, the

present, and the future. It can weave a cycle of destiny.
"In due time, I will restore Aurore Lee's soul fragment to its state prior to the descent ritual. All you need to do is prepare a body with the essence of life for her."
Lumian fell silent. After a moment, he asked in a low voice, "Descent ritual... Is that the ritual to forge a body for your descent?"

Chapter 151: Temptation

Termiboros' thunderous voice resonated in Lumian's mind.

"Yes."

A snort of laughter broke free from Lumian.

His words oozed sarcasm as he retorted, "So, Aurore and the entire village were snuffed out just so you could set foot on this soil?

"Why the hell should I help you shatter your shackles? If you morphed into an Angel with a boon, I could've swiped your abilities over and over with the ritual I just performed, under the watchful eyes of the mighty existence. Until, of course, I too bask in the angelic status of the Inevitability pathway. Then, I could breathe life back into Aurore and restore everyone to the pre-Cordu destruction era. How pathetic would you look then?

"If you hold the right Beyonder characteristic, I can bide my time until I ascend as an Angel of the Hunter pathway, seizing power on par with your Inevitability skills. Once my army is vast enough, I'll free you, crush you, subjugate you, and make you resurrect Aurore. Hell, I might be able to pull it off myself. I'll subject you to an eternity of torment till the end of time.

"I never had the hots for the Inevitability pathway's boon, but now that I know the ritual was meant for your descent, I'm salivating at the thought of siphoning off all your might and pride."

The more Lumian rambled, the higher his adrenaline spiked. His Provoker potion seemed to digest a notch.

Termiboros' voice was eerily steady, unfazed by Lumian's rant.

"I've encountered my fair share of Beyonders in the cosmos, and I've seen legions of races graced by the Lord's touch. Most of them can't cross the threshold into divinity because that one extra step would obliterate their physical and mental existence.

"The quest for godhood is rife with peril. Are you so sure you can truly evolve into an Angel?

"You should be aware that we're not talking about slim odds here. Saying it's a one-in-a-million or one-in-ten-million chance doesn't even begin to capture the enormous task of ascending to the Angel level.

"If you perish on the Beyonder path, Aurore Lee will follow suit. The seal binding you will naturally dissolve, freeing me from my predicament."

Lumian threw his head back and laughed.

His laughter bounced off the quarry's cavernous walls, heightening the eerie quiet and heaviness underground.

"So, why aren't you sitting tight, waiting for me to kick the bucket?" Lumian picked up the carbide lamp and strode out of the

quarry cave. A cryptic smile played on his lips. "I don't give a damn what you're plotting or what your endgame is. I couldn't care less whether you're a saint or a sinner. All I know is that Aurore and everyone in Cordu Village are dead because of you."

He paused for a beat, his face contorted into a maniacal grin.

"Someone's gotta pay the piper for this. Guillaume Bénet, you, and even your so-called lord!"

Termiboros fell silent. The booming voice that had filled Lumian's mind, heart, bloodstream, bone marrow, and cavities disappeared entirely.

Phew... Lumian heaved a sigh, clutching the carbide lamp as he navigated the pitch-black underground.

Despite the conversation's brevity, it had drained him.

In Lumian's previous world-view, corruption was merely that—corruption. At its extreme, it was comparable to power granted by an evil god. The concept of an Angel being shackled within him was beyond his wildest dreams!

Amidst the wreckage of Cordu Village, atop the crimson-hued mountain, stood the body of a three-headed, six-armed behemoth—a vessel designed for an incoming Angel. It was a mystery how much it deviated from a bona fide Angel, but it already filled Lumian with a sense of invincibility.

Lumian couldn't deny the allure of Termiboros's proposition.

Had he not remembered their vile deeds, he might have been swayed to give it a shot.

From where he stood, pledging allegiance to the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery seemed no different than submitting to the hidden existence known as Inevitability. At worst, he'd lose himself.

Regaining his composure, Lumian's senses suddenly tingled. He darted into a side alcove, using loose gravel to snuff out the carbide lamp.

Moments later, the hurried footfalls of three people echoed from the adjacent tunnel, soon swallowed by the inky darkness.

Underground Trier is a hive of activity too... Lumian bided his time for a couple of minutes before digging out the carbide lamp and rejoining the upward path.

The interruption allowed him to collect his thoughts and consider a conundrum.

Given that the corruption inside him was a living entity, the Angel of the Inevitability domain, Termiboros, why had his plea for a boon been successful?

Termiboros wasn't just raw power lacking consciousness, responding automatically to the "correct" ritual. He could deny

granting the boon.
Could it be that His imprisonment is so severe that He can't even choose to resist the ritual? The thought made Lumian realize why Termiboros was so desperate to flee.
According to Madam Magician, with every boon He granted, Termiboros would weaken marginally, and the corresponding corruption would dwindle.
Simultaneously, the seal imposed by the great existence wouldn't slacken. As Termiboros's power faded, He would be shackled to the brink of extinction. Eventually, even His consciousness might be expunged.
Lumian steadied himself and began to replay Termiboros's utterances.
Great Old Ones, Above the Sequences, he'd said Great Old Ones and Above the Sequences...
Lumian's head pounded, as if something was attempting to burrow out of his skull, the instant he dredged up these topics.
He stopped his recollection abruptly and murmured to himself, a residual sense of dread lingering, Merely possessing certain knowledge can inflict serious harm? Had I not been safeguarded by the seal of the great existence, would I be dead or afflicted with abnormalities?
I was contemplating exploiting Termiboros's desperation to escape, to bleed Him dry by compelling Him to respond to the ritual magic, thereby boosting the likelihood of success and the eventual impact. But it seems the Angel has plenty of tricks up His sleeve to screw me over, even in His imprisoned state...
I need to tread carefully. Before I really tap into Termiboros, I must have Madam Magician verify my plan for any flaws.
On this front, Lumian doubted that the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Hela, would offer any viable advice. Only Madam Magician, who could effortlessly slip in and out of the time loop and easily tackle the colossus atop the crimson mountain, was worthy of his trust.
Lost in a whirlwind of thoughts, Lumian, lamp in hand, navigated his way back to the level marked by a street name, leveraging his honed Hunter's intuition and recollection.
He attempted to shout in a hushed tone, "Termiboros..."
No answer came.
Lumian intended to inquire whether the Angel, imprisoned within him, was aware of the events in Cordu. After a thoughtful examination, he concluded that Termiboros likely remained in the dark.
Termiboros had only materialized in Cordu at the ritual's

culmination before being shackled. He was oblivious to the intricate details.
Phew... Lumian let out a sigh, surveying his present condition.
His Provoker potion had undergone further digestion. It was akin to encapsulating a fresh principle of action.
Could inciting a superior entity expedite the digestion of the Provoker potion? Ah yes, this is a high-ranking entity within the Inevitability domain. In a way, it's a tip of fate. It aligns somewhat with the principles I've deduced... Lumian mused with a chuckle.
Were it not for Termiboros's silence, he would have stirred Him up thrice daily, like clockwork meals!
Pondering over this, Lumian felt that goading an Angel to digest this morsel of a potion wasn't a worthy trade-off.
He hypothesized two reasons. First, Termiboros was sealed and presented a relatively low threat. Second, Termiboros hadn't genuinely been incited.
Shaking his head, Lumian curbed his thoughts, shelving matters whose solutions eluded him.
He retraced his steps to the subterranean Rue Anarchie and climbed the stone steps towards the surface.
Having snuffed out the carbide lamp and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian instantly noticed Charlie perched on the steps outside.
Charlie puffed on a cigarette, gazing at the grayish-white sky with a somber countenance.
"What's up?" Lumian settled down next to Charlie.
Charlie heaved a sigh. "Miss Ethans has moved out."
"Isn't that a good thing?" Lumian queried, his smile unwavering.
Charlie stammered, pausing for a few seconds before admitting, "Yes, it indeed is. Too many folks around here know her and her deeds. Sigh..."
Lumian clicked his tongue and rose, approaching the Whiskey Sour vendor and presenting 5 coppets worth of copper coins.
"Half a liter of Apple Whiskey Sour."
The vendor responded with a grin, "Got it."
He ended up pouring Lumian more than the requested volume of liquor.
Lumian's eyebrows quirked, but he refrained from questioning. He ambled back to Charlie, took a seat, and nonchalantly remarked, "Seems like the Whiskey Sour guy recognizes me?"
Charlie chuckled.
"He might be aware you're with the Savoie Gang. No, the Savoie Mob."
Lumian sipped his Whiskey Sour, inquiring, "How'd he find out?"

Charlie cleared his throat.
"After breaking the news to Miss Ethans last night, I hit the underground bar for a drink and mentioned your induction into the Savoie Mob and your takeover of Auberge du Coq Doré."
A vivid image flashed in Lumian's mind:
Charlie, beer in hand, clambering onto a small round table, flailing his stubby arms.
"Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears! You wouldn't believe the bombshell that dropped at the motel today! Ciel, our Room 207 resident, is now calling the shots for the Savoie Mob and has sent the Poison Spur Mob packing!"
With a drawn-out sigh, Lumian turned to Charlie and quipped, "You're just worried the police won't come knocking at my door, aren't you?"

Chapter 152: "Entrustment"

Charlie's bones shook as Lumian's words settled in his ears.

"S-so you're saying, you don't want word getting around about you joining the Savoie Mob?"

Charlie had seen the leaders of the Savoie Mob, Poison Spur Mob, and the rest; their names carried weight in the market district of Rue Anarchie. Yet, as notorious as they were, the law never seemed to touch them.

Lumian took a slow pull of his Whiskey Sour, his grin returning.

"That's fine. Just think twice before you speak, that's all."

Even though Lumian had infiltrated the Savoie Mob, he was far from claiming the title of a leader. He hadn't been privy to the mob's deepest secrets, didn't have a crew of thugs at his disposal, and all he had to show for it was the rundown dump they called Auberge du Coq Doré.

So Lumian had his sights set on a fast-track to infamy, eager to climb the mob's ladder and fulfill Mr. K's mission.

A mission that involved gaining the trust and favor of Mr. K, and eventually finding a place in the organization behind him—all to complete the task given by Madam Magician.

There is something off about the whole thing... Lumian thought, his left hand stroking his chin.

Charlie, standing by his side, asked hesitantly, "What exactly should I keep quiet about?"

He had his hunches, but he didn't want to risk annoying the lawless Lumian by not covering all bases.

Lumian's smile didn't falter as he turned to Charlie.

"Avoid discussing anything tied to Susanna Mattise. That includes any mention of threats I made to her, or that time I posed as a lawyer to get into the police station to talk to you."

He had meant to warn Charlie about this, but hadn't found the right moment.

"Got it." Charlie visibly relaxed. "You know, I was thinking about telling the guys at the bar about the time we chased Wilson out of that motel..."

Charlie's number one hobby was regaling the crowd with his exploits.

But Lumian's eyes turned stormy at his words.

His gut was telling him Charlie was about to walk into some minor trouble, but it wouldn't be anything life-threatening.

In theory, it has nothing to do with Susanna Mattise. If it did, it wouldn't be just trouble, it would be a disaster... I suppose I can stop worrying about Susanna Mattise for a while, but how long is a

while? Lumian mulled over the sense of bad luck.
He'd come to realize that unless someone was extremely unlucky or lucky, or if danger was about to strike, he needed to concentrate to perceive a person's general luck through his intuition.
It was unlike a Hunter's danger sense. It wasn't always activated passively.
Charlie's voice began to fade as he talked. He turned to Lumian and asked, "Why are you staring at me like that?"
He was half expecting Ciel to jump out with a prank.
Lumian sneered.
"You might want to swing by the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and say a prayer. I have a feeling you're about to hit a rough patch."
His tone mirrored that of Osta Trul, the conman.
"What kind of rough patch?" Charlie asked, his voice sharp.
Then it hit him. "How would you know?"
"I have a hunch," Lumian replied, a smirk playing on his lips.
Of course, it's a joke... Charlie let out a sigh of relief.
"I'm hoping your prediction's off, then."
"On the contrary, I couldn't be more certain." Lumian's words were rock solid.
Charlie squinted at him, suspicion etched on his face.
Lumian let out a low chuckle.
"And if I'm wrong, I'll give you a thrashing. That way, even if something bad does happen, that just proves me more right."
"..." Charlie was speechless.
Is that even allowed?
Regardless, this approach could come in handy for some practical jokes with some slight modification...
Lumian was about to rise when he noticed a thin, mangy mutt creeping towards Auberge du Coq Doré from the shadowy street, eyeing the trash he'd tossed from the fruit vendor's cart.
The mutt moved with care, aware that many of the destitute locals would gladly turn him into dinner.
Just then, Lumian lunged forward, pressing the dog's neck to the ground.
Caught off guard, the mutt writhed helplessly, baring its teeth in a futile attempt to bite, but its head was immobile.
With his free hand, Lumian pulled out a small vial of tulip powder, emptying its contents into his pocket.
Then, he held the vial to the mutt's frothing mouth, collecting the saliva as the dog squirmed.
Soon, he had five milliliters. He released his grip and stood up.
The mutt, ready to snap at him, whimpered and scampered off,

tail tucked between its legs, when Lumian shot it a menacing glance.
Charlie, who had been standing by, was flabbergasted.
A story he'd once heard came rushing back to him.
The protagonist in the tale would often describe the villain's cruelty with a line penned by best-selling author Aurore Lee: He would kick any dog that crossed his path!
Lumian downed the rest of his Whiskey Sour and made his way into the motel.
As he passed the front desk, the perpetually grumpy Madame Fels, forced a smile.
"Good morning, Ciel—Monsieur Ciel."
Lumian gave the plump Madame Fels a sideways glance and asked nonchalantly, "No sign of Monsieur Ive today either?"
Monsieur Ive, the owner of Auberge du Coq Doré, was known far and wide in Rue Anarchie for his penny-pinching ways.
As the new 'guardian' of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian figured he ought to have a word with Monsieur Ive, just to make sure he didn't run crying to the cops, afraid the Savoie Mob would shake him down for more cash.
Madame Fels pursed her lips.
"As stingy as he is, only paying for a weekly cleaning crew, he's a stickler for cleanliness and wouldn't be caught dead in the motel."
"Who cleans his house?" Lumian asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.
"He's a widower. He and his two kids take care of it." Madame Fels scoffed.
If she were the one with that kind of money and a motel to boot, she would hire someone to handle such chores. She'd just sit back and enjoy life.
Lumian nodded and chuckled.
"I noticed he didn't drop by after the cleaning on Monday. Is he still kicking?"
Madame Fels replied, a hint of fear in her voice, "I visit him thrice a week to deliver the motel's earnings and various bills. I'll let him know you want to see him."
She mistook Lumian's words as a veiled threat to Monsieur Ive. If he didn't meet with the new guardian of Auberge du Coq Doré soon, his survival might be at stake.
Lumian didn't bother to clarify. He climbed the stairs to his room on the second floor. Under his pillow, he found Mr. K's finger and tucked it back into his pocket.
After dealing with the tulip powder, he planned to pick up some containers for the ingredients he needed to gather next. But then, a

knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.
Lumian swung the door open, curiosity piqued—he didn't recognize the footsteps.
In the doorway stood a man in his forties, clad in a dark jacket, worn-out brown trousers, and a grubby cotton hat. He offered a smile, asking, "Is this Monsieur Ciel?"
"Who else would it be? Madam?" Lumian retorted, his eyes taking in the man's appearance, expression, and body language.
His brown hair, though slightly greasy, was neatly combed. His dark-brown eyes held a hint of sycophancy, and his lips were creased with lines of practiced smiles. He had an affable air, but there was an unmistakable slickness about him.
"Yes, yes, yes," the man echoed Lumian's words.
Lumian's eyebrows twitched.
"And who might you be?"
"I'm Fitz from Room 401. Bankrupt businessman," the man introduced himself with a congenial smile.
Without waiting for Lumian to press further, he spilled his beans.
"I went belly up 'cause of a con that cost me 100,000 verl d'or. I've been traveling between Trier and Suhit for over a decade, saving up. Wanted to settle down, start a family, but then this swindler tricked me out of everything, promising a joint venture.
"If you help me recover that money, I'm willing to part with 30%, no, 50%!"
Lumian didn't invite Fitz into Room 207. Leaning against the doorframe, arms folded, he asked, "Why didn't you go after that money with Margot or Wilson before?"
It wasn't as if they required an upfront payment.
Fitz didn't beat around the bush.
"I did go to Margot. He agreed initially, but then one day, he just said it wasn't possible to recover the money."
Even the Poison Spur Mob couldn't retrieve it? Was the con man bankrupt or backed by someone who made the Poison Spur Mob tread lightly? Lumian, who had been only half-interested till now, leaned in. "Did Margot say why?"
Fitz shook his head. "No, but it's certainly not because Timmons is broke. His dance hall in Quartier de l'Observatoire is printing money!"
Timmons... Lumian suspected the con man had either powerful backing or was shielded by a high-ranking figure, which made the Poison Spur Mob wary of pressing him for repayment.
Or maybe, Timmons was a force unto himself.
"So why do you think I can get your money back?" Lumian asked Fitz, a smirk playing on his lips.

Fitz pondered for a moment before laying it all out.
"You're more ruthless than Margot. Plus, even if you decide not to pursue after your investigation, I have nothing to lose.
"Without that money, I can't afford to pay a dime."
"Honest to a fault." Lumian nodded, appreciating the candor. "I'll look into it, but don't get your hopes up."
If Timmons was simply bluffing and managed to scare off the Poison Spur Mob, the prospect of pocketing an easy 50,000 verl d'or was tempting to anyone.
Fitz, the bankrupt businessman, was playing a long shot. With a nod of assurance from Lumian, he thanked him and made his exit from the second floor.
In that moment, Lumian realized that his spirituality had bounced back considerably. The recovered amount surpassed his original spirituality reserves.
The Alms Monk has boosted my spirituality significantly. At Sequence 8, I can rival the spirituality of other pathways... Lumian mused quietly.
Simultaneously, he recalled an uncanny sensation he experienced while sipping the Whiskey Sour.
If he chose to live in poverty, practiced self-restraint, abstained from alcohol, shunned wastefulness, sought alms, and preached, all while adopting the demeanor of an ascetic monk, he would likely experience an enhancement in his intuitive sense of destiny and the likelihood of success of his five ritual spells.
Yet, Lumian had no intention of following that path. He believed it would morph him into a mirror image of the Bestower, gradually merging his identity with His.
Shaking off his introspective thoughts, Lumian left the room, making a beeline for Salle de Bal Brise. His next move was to solicit the Savoie Mob's help to gather the remaining ingredients and the right containers required for the Prophecy Spell.
He had to seize every opportunity at his disposal!

Chapter 153: Strange Rule

Standing before the white globe-shaped statue, an assemblage of countless skulls, in the Salle de Bal Brise,

Lumian paused. His eyes scanned the Intis inscription—"They sleep here, waiting for the arrival of happiness and hope."

Pulling his gaze from the statue, he strode toward the entrance.

Two henchmen, donned in crisp white shirts and dark overcoats, spun on their heels to face him,

"Good morning, Ciel."

They'd been buzzing with the whispers about this brash newcomer who'd reportedly offed Margot and left Wilson licking his wounds, all within a few fleeting days. It was no secret that he'd been roped into the Savoie Mob.

"Good morning, my cabbages," Lumian tossed back, his lips curling into a grin as he borrowed Darième's pet phrase.

The Salle de Bal Brise was still waking up. Waitstaff moved with placid efficiency, arranging chairs, scrubbing the floors.

Lumian had intended to seek out Louis, a familiar face. No need to ruffle the feathers of Baron Brignais over such small matters. But there, nestled at the bar, sat Maxime—the very same one who'd tailed him.

Maxime, still sporting his trademark cap, drank a pint of rye beer.

A smirk spread across Lumian's face as he sauntered over.

Perceiving a presence nearing him, Maxime, out of habit, flicked a sidelong glance.

He went rigid, as though struck by a sudden frost.

In the next heartbeat, he vaulted off his stool and swiveled toward Lumian, plastering on a toadying grin.

"Good morning, Ciel."

He too had caught wind of the rumors—of Ciel's assassination of Margot and the defenestration of Wilson from the fourth floor of Auberge du Coq Doré.

A surge of relief washed over him. Thank the stars he hadn't pushed his luck when he'd been nabbed tailing Ciel. Considering Ciel's penchant for violence, he could've easily ended up as fodder for the rats in some godforsaken corner of Underground Trier.

This man was a bona fide killing machine. No qualms, no hesitation!

Lumian smiled.

"Merely 'Ciel' doesn't quite ring with the proper respect, does it?"

Seeing Maxime blanch, Lumian added,

"I'm curious as to when I'll hear 'Baron Ciel' rolling off your tongue."

This was a jest, yes, but also a thinly veiled indication of his

ambition—to rise to the ranks of the Savoie Mob leadership, and sooner rather than later.
"Soon, very soon," Maxime replied with a forced smile.
His internal dialogue sang a different tune: I'd call you 'Baron' this very moment if it kept you happy, just like our 'Baron' isn't a real baron, but a self-proclaimed one.
Lumian claimed a stool at the bar and patted the one next to him.
"Have a seat. I have a few questions for you."
Maxime swiftly obliged, gesturing to the rye beer before him. "Fancy a pint?"
"Ranger for me, if you please," Lumian responded without missing a beat.
A 'Ranger'—a tangy blend of orange and pomegranate beer—cost two licks more than the rye.
Though it pinched his pocket, Maxime hollered over to the bartender, "A glass of Ranger."
Swiveling back towards Lumian, he flashed a grin.
"What would you like to know?"
Lumian bided his time until the generous pint of the orange-colored beer was delivered before launching his inquiry, "How did you join our Savoie Mob?"
"I'm Savoie born and bred." Maxime gestured to his weather-beaten features. "Hopped over to Trier in search of greener pastures, but my buddy who'd put me up had already joined the Savoie Mob."
The Savoie Mob was the brainchild of a handful of Savoie natives who'd made their living as laborers, servants, and peddlers in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. They were a fierce lot, unafraid to put themselves in harm's way, and they'd quickly carved out their own slice of the pie. As the mob's influence grew, they began to pull in recruits from other provinces and even Trier locals, but the heart of the organization still came from Savoie.
Lumian gave a slight nod, steering the conversation to his next question,
"And is Baron Brignais the head honcho of the whole Savoie Mob?"
"No." Maxime stared at Lumian, aghast.
He'd joined the mob without even grasping the basics?
And he'd taken out Margot and severely injured Wilson in the name of the Savoie Mob!
Lumian took a leisurely sip of his orange-pomegranate beer, a playful grin adorning his face.
"I was under the impression that Baron Brignais was the head honcho. I mean, his swagger, his flair, his brawn... how could he not be the top dog?"
Maxime recoiled in terror, clapping a hand over Lumian's mouth.

Were such words safe to spill in such an open area?
If word got back to that person, it could put a serious kink in his relationship with the baron!
Maxime wasted no time in setting the record straight.
"The baron is in charge of the Salle de Bal Brise, Avenue du Marché, and the loan shark operations. His peers include "Rat" Christo who oversees smuggling, "Giant" Simon who runs the dance joints on Rue du Rossignol, "Red Boots" Franca who oversees Rue des Blouses Blanches, and "Bloody Palm" Black who controls half of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
"There's a top dog above them, but I've never laid eyes on him nor do I know who he is."
In a hushed voice, Maxime added, "Rumor has it he's a legitimate merchant, a card-carrying member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce. And he's no small fry, either."
A member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce? So, the Chamber of Commerce is backing a mob to handle their dirty laundry and keep the competition in check... Lumian pieced together the puzzle from his own experiences as a drifter, snippets from Aurore's offhand comments, and a smattering of books, magazines, and newspapers he'd devoured at home.
News of Ciel's arrival at the Salle de Bal Brise reached Louis, Baron Brignais' shadow. He made a beeline for the bar, his heart pounding with worry that the audacious country boy was about to stir the pot yet again!
He was really worried that the bold country boy would cause trouble again!
Finding Lumian engrossed in conversation with Maxime, Louis slid onto a stool on the other side, easing into the chat, "What's got you coming to the Salle de Bal Brise at this hour?"
Lumian shot him a sly smile. "I've got a favor to ask."
Louis, his forehead still sporting a nasty bruise, shrank back at the sight of Lumian's grin.
"What is it?"
Sensing they were about to dive into heavier matters, Maxime beat a hasty retreat from the bar, nursing his rye beer closer to the dance floor.
Lumian retracted his gaze and said slowly, "I need you to fetch me a lizard's eye, a rock from an eagle's nest, and a snake's venom gland."
He kept the full list of the Prophecy Spell's ingredients under wraps, planning to source them from different places.
"What do you need those for?" Louis found the trio of items vile and bizarre.

Lumian chuckled. "Remember how Margot bit the dust?"
Louis felt a chill run down his spine. It felt like a veiled threat, and it was working!
I'm not trying to rattle you... Lumian snickered to himself.
"I stabbed him. My blade was laced with poison."
"Right," Louis remembered Ciel's chat with Baron Brignais.
Seeing Louis still hadn't caught on, Lumian mentally berated, *Why is this guy denser than Charlie?*
He sighed, spelling it out for him. "Those items are to whip up another batch of poison."
"What are you planning?" Louis nearly jumped out of his skin.
He had a hunch Lumian was about to stir the pot.
"Self-defense," Lumian replied tersely.
With no grounds to object, Louis let out a sigh of relief, promising, "I'll get someone on the job to collect those three items for you."
He ran through the list of items again, making sure he'd got it straight.
Once he'd confirmed the details, Lumian took a swig of his Ranger, switching gears.
"Ever heard of the Salle de Bal Unique?"
Louis eyed Lumian suspiciously, advising, "Best steer clear of that place. The dance hall's owner, Timmons, is tight with the police commissioner of Quartier de l'Observatoire. And there's a shadowy organization pulling his strings. Anyone who's tried to squeeze them has found themselves in a world of hurt, and some have even vanished off the face of the world."
Each quartier in Trier had its own police headquarters, each headed by a commissioner.
The police commissioner's official title was the Commissioner of the Trier Police Affairs Committee, answering to the Minister of the Trier Police Department.
So that's why the Poison Spur Mob never had the guts to chase up Timmons' debt... Lumian nodded, deep in thought.
Seeing the worry etched on Louis's face, afraid he was about to stir up a hornet's nest, Lumian threw him a curveball.
"Who else in the Poison Spur Mob ranks up there with Margot? And who's their boss?"
What are you trying to do? Louis almost blurted out.
Could it be that Ciel's planning to knock off all the heavy hitters in the Poison Spur Mob?
Are you out of your mind?
Keeping his cool, Louis replied, "That's none of your concern right now."
Lumian responded with a knowing smile, not pushing the matter.

He downed his Ranger.
...
In the shadowy enclave of Quartier de l'Observatoire, nestled near the catacombs,
Lumian found Osta Trul huddled by the bonfire.
He laughed mockingly.
"You're the most professional person I've ever come across."
Like clockwork, Osta was here seven days a week, peddling his con.
"I'd love to be soaking myself on some beach, but my debts tell a different story." The thought of hopping a steam locomotive out of Trier and dodging his outstanding loans had crossed Osta's mind.
Yet, each time he made it as far as the station, Baron Brignais's goons would be there to give him a good thrashing.
This had instilled in him a healthy fear of the Baron's reach, and he'd since abandoned any such ideas.
"I need you to fetch me a few things," Lumian cut to the chase, settling down beside Osta. "For each item you bring, there's an extra 5 verl d'or in it for you."
Osta's eyes sparked with interest.
"What are you after?"
Lumian stared into the fire, his voice low. "Lynx innards, hyena tongue, stag bone marrow, and any deadly herb."
"They're not easy to come by." Osta tried to haggle.
He'd already made up his mind to scour the eateries in Quartier de l'Observatoire.
Lumian brushed him off, changing the subject. "Where can I find aquatic monsters in Trier?"
Osta pondered a moment before replying, "There's an underground river in the catacombs nearby, fed by the Srenzo River. Every so often, someone claims to have run into an aquatic monster. And occasionally, some surface along the Srenzo River banks, but they're quickly dispatched by the Purifiers or the Machinery Hivemind."
Lumian nodded. "Do you know the Salle de Bal Unique?"
"Sure do." Osta pointed skyward. "It's over on Rue Ancienne, right by Place du Purgatoire."
"1 verl d'or. Show me the way." Lumian rose to his feet.
He planned to scope out the place, gather what intel he could. If it was a dead end, he'd move on.
In no time, Osta was leading Lumian topside, veering into Rue Ancienne near the square, and halting in front of a vintage edifice.
The building, a somber shade of blue-gray, retained its pre-Roselle charm.
Classic pediments, a chevron roof, and leaded windows.

The Salle de Bal Unique occupied the ground floor, its entrance resembling a giant maw.
It happened to be past noon, and a carriage pulled up to the curb as three men and a woman alighted.
Dressed in dark short suits, they sauntered towards the Salle de Bal Unique.
As they neared the entrance, each member of the quartet produced a monocle, fitting it over their right eye.
Watching this, Lumian turned to Osta, bemusement written all over his face.
Osta, flashing a knowing smile, enlightened him, "That's one of Salle de Bal Unique's rules. Everyone who steps inside must be donning a short suit and a monocle."

Chapter 154: Mini-Theater

Taking in Osta's revelation, Lumian couldn't help a chuckle, thinking, *What kind of strange rule is this?*

His mind flicked back to the turtle-walking, the space bridge, clutching a candle while touring the catacombs, and sprinting just to keep up with the latest fad. He felt that this seemed inconsequential, but perhaps not for the folks of Trier, who seemed to relish something unique.

As the stream of monocle-clad patrons flowed in, Lumian queried with a casual air, "What happens if a newcomer isn't privy to the rule?"

Osta gestured to the far end of Rue Ancienne.

"There's a place selling monocles and short suits there.

"I'd wager the proprietor of Salle de Bal Unique is behind it."

No doubt about it... Lumian murmured under his breath.

He wouldn't put it past Timmons to concoct such a rule for the Salle de Bal Unique to cash in on the monocle and short suit trade.

Undeniably, it was also a nod to the citizens of Trier's relentless pursuit of the latest trends and fashion.

"How long has this joint been in business?" Lumian nonchalantly gestured toward the Salle de Bal Unique across the street.

"Over two decades. It's been here since I first landed in Trier. Rumor has it, it opened when dance halls became the rage." Osta stole a glance toward Place du Purgatoire. "Anything else? I need to get back underground."

His mind was on making money, wary of missing out on potential clients seeking his divination and "assistance."

Lumian swung his gaze onto him.

Osta's heart stuttered, feeling as though he were in the crosshairs of a formidable predator.

"What's the matter?" He subconsciously forced a smile again.

Lumian withdrew his gaze, nonchalantly advising, "Stay sharp for the next couple of days."

"What?" Osta found himself flustered, bewildered, and somewhat frightened.

Ciel isn't threatening me, is he? We just had a smooth collaboration. He even tasked me with finding some materials!

A grin played at the corners of Lumian's mouth.

"Exactly as I said, but it's got nothing to do with me.

"Also, do me a favor and dig up more details on the aquatic monster. The more comprehensive, the better. Same pay as before."

Is he implying that I might be getting unlucky and be beaten up?

Osta tried to decipher Lumian's cryptic message.
At the same time, he found something oddly familiar about Lumian's demeanor and tone but couldn't quite put his finger on it.
Retracing his steps toward Place du Purgatoire, Osta resolved to cast a divination for himself to see if ill fortune truly loomed ahead.
As a Secrets Suppliant, his divination prowess was remarkably superior to the average person.
Suddenly, it struck him why he found the whole exchange eerily familiar.
Wasn't this the exact manner he addressed his own "customers"?
Across from the antiquated building, Lumian contemplated whether to invest in a short suit and monocle to infiltrate the Salle de Bal Unique and gather intel.
If Timmons is indeed part of some mysterious organization and chummy with the police commissioner, snatching him for a bounty of verl d'or isn't a smart move. It'd muck up my operation.
Wouldn't the money spent on the short suits and monocles go down the drain? They don't come cheap, after all. Lumian was never one to hold back on expenses, with Trier teeming with "generous souls," but he knew when to pinch pennies.
Mulling over his options, he scanned his surroundings, his eyes landing on an "Alone" bar diagonally across the Salle de Bal Unique.
Patrons of a dance hall would likely frequent a bar too. They must be rivals... Suddenly, a light bulb went off in Lumian's head.
After all, enemies often knew one another best, and those most familiar with a dance hall would likely be its competitors!
Even if their accounts were likely embellished, they could still offer some grains of truth.
Without missing a beat, Lumian swiveled around and sauntered into the Alone bar.
The buildings on Rue Ancienne were steeped in antiquity, with most dating back to pre-Roselle times. Their windows were mere slits, letting in scant daylight. The overarching theme here was one of darkness.
Unperturbed by the unlit gas lamps, Lumian navigated through the dimly lit hall, sparsely populated by patrons, and took a stool at the bar.
Removing his cap, he ordered, "A gin on the rocks."
The bar counter was tucked away in the darkest corner of the joint. The lean bartender was shrouded in shadows, his features obscured, revealing only a silhouette.
Despite Lumian's keen eyesight, he could barely discern the man's curly black hair, slightly blue eyes, and a somewhat low bridge of

his nose.
As he awaited his gin, Lumian flashed a casual smile and remarked,
"Business seems slow here. The Salle de Bal Unique across the way appears to be drawing quite the crowd."
The bartender slid a lemon wedge and iced gin across to Lumian.
Casting a glance at the door, he replied, "We do alright, but most folks are downstairs waiting for the play.
"How about it? Fancy a peek? Patrons with drinks can gain entry to the cellar for five licks. Uh, make it eight for your gin."
"A play?" Lumian couldn't hide his astonishment.
This was a facet none of the Rue Anarchie bars could boast.
The bartender sighed, explaining, "They can dance, sing, shoot pool, play cards across the road. We've got to stand out somehow to lure in customers.
"Many bars and cafes on the north shore now have their own mini-theaters."
Lumian was at a loss for words, resorting to a mere sigh. "Has the bar scene gotten so cutthroat?"
He then produced three 20-coppet silver coins etched with gears and a 5-coppet copper coin, handing them to the bartender.
The total amounted to 13 licks or 65 coppets, including the ticket to the mini-theater for the performance.
The bartender promptly pointed to the stairs next to the counter leading down.
"You can head to the cellar anytime. Feel free to take your drink with you."
No ticket required? Lumian wasn't in a rush to vacate the counter.
He smiled, asking, "The Salle de Bal Unique across the way seems rather... unique?"
"It certainly is." The bartender lowered his voice. "Did you get swindled over there? Is that why you're so curious?"
"Exactly." Lumian nodded without missing a beat.
He saw no reason of hiding it.
The bartender chortled.
"We get scammed hopefuls straggling in here every day, but none ever pull it off. Heck, I once spotted the police commissioner of Quartier de l'Observatoire, Conde, strutting into the dance hall, all decked out in a short suit and a monocle."
Timmons is no pushover... Lumian quickly abandoned any notion of conning the proprietor of Salle de Bal Unique.
Gin in hand, he pushed away from the counter, making his way down to the cellar.
Before he could reach the timber door, the bartender's shout

echoed, "Patron coming through!"
The door creaked open with a groan.
Lumian slowed his stride, taking in his surroundings as he stepped inside.
It was a makeshift theater, a half-height wooden platform stretching across the far end. Two gas wall lamps cast a feeble light.
Where the illumination fell short, stools and chairs were scattered sparsely.
At that moment, over 20 guests were settled in, engrossed in the show unfolding on the stage.
The silence was deafening, punctuated only by the sporadic clink of glasses, the dimly lit cellar rendered almost eerily hushed.
Lumian claimed a chair near the exit, his eyes drifting to the stage.
The performer was not a person but a puppet half the height of a person.
Adorned in a palette of yellow, white, and red paint, regardless of gender, each puppet bore an overstated grin.
Guided by nearly invisible threads, the puppets moved, opening their mouths, turning, running, carrying out a variety of plays.
From somewhere, a deep male voice and a slightly shrill female voice took turns delivering the lines.
Bathed in the faint, yellowish glow from the gas lamps, against the looming darkness, the painted clown puppets took on a sinister edge.
Lumian was instinctively put off by the ambiance.
Not one to squander the ticket cost, he stuck around a bit longer until the play wrapped up.
Throughout, not a sound was made. The audience, some faces bathed in the yellow light, others shrouded in darkness, were far more engrossed than Lumian had imagined.
Having drained his gin, Lumian took his leave of the mini-theater, where only two gas lamps held off the darkness.
...
As Lumian made his way back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he claimed a window seat in a public carriage. As the shops and pedestrians retreated in the backdrop, he mulled over his next moves.
First order of business, secure some aquatic monster flesh and collect the necessary components for the Prophecy Spell. Second, elevate my standing in the Savoie Mob, aiming for a leadership position sooner rather than later... What's the plan...
Lost in his thoughts, his eyes snagged on a familiar figure.
There was Wilson of the Poison Spur Mob, clad in a white shirt and

black jacket, his craggy face framed by a mop of curly brown hair.
With his two goons in tow, Wilson navigated Avenue du Marché, disappearing down a side alley. He moved with an assured stride, his posture unscathed.
Lumian was taken aback. He's up and about after being thrown down by him?
The fall was from four stories high!
That was some recovery. Made cockroaches look like amateurs!
A theory started to form in Lumian's mind.
The Poison Spur Mob has extraordinary healing powers?
Possibly Planter pathway's Doctor?
As he pondered, a memory surfaced.
In his dream, Madame Pualis had demonstrated the power to heal wounds instantaneously!
Although the dream might have distorted or exaggerated the reality, Madame Pualis's anomalous pathway did encompass a sphere related to life.
And Louis Lund was suspected to show up on Avenue du Marché...
Could the force behind the Poison Spur Mob be linked to the evil god worshiped by Madame Pualis? As Lumian ruminated over this, a smirk slowly crept onto his face.

Chapter 155: Jenna

The circumstances of Wilson's rapid recovery were riddled with uncertainty. Lumian toyed with the idea that it was the work of a Sequence 8 "Doctor" from the Planter pathway, or a Sequence 9 "Apothecary" from its namesake pathway. Yet, his heart clung to the hope of unmasking Madame Pualis and her subordinates.

Had he pieced together the puzzle sooner, and had Wilson and his crew not gone far off into the distance, Lumian would have thrown himself from the moving public carriage, hot on their trail. He envisioned wrangling Wilson into some clandestine quarry cave, pressing him for answers about his miraculous recuperation.

If this saga bore no link to the evil god that Madame Pualis revered, Lumian was prepared to swallow his pride and apologize to Wilson, who, in turn, would owe Lumian his life for not permanently silencing him.

But, to snuff him out was also on the table. The ball was in Lumian's court.

As the carriage came to a halt at its station, Lumian was the first to alight, retracing his steps to the alley where Wilson and his crew had disappeared.

No barricades existed here. It was a bustling place, with people constantly coming and going. Wilson and his gang hadn't left any clear trail. Lumian devoted a painstaking quarter of an hour to trying to discern any signs of them, finally admitting defeat.

But he wasn't beaten down. Wilson may have slipped through his fingers, but there were others like Will or Williamson. The Poison Spur Mob was a hydra of sorts, with a plethora of leaders just a notch above Wilson. Each had their own turf, their own dealings. They could run, but they couldn't hide. Lumian just needed patience. Sooner or later, he'd cross paths with one or two of them. And they, undoubtedly, were more intimately involved with the shadowy forces pulling the strings behind the Poison Spur Mob than Wilson. They knew more!

Phew... Exhaling a deep breath, Lumian wrestled his impatience into submission, deciding to lay low and watch for a while before concocting a hunting strategy.

If the Poison Spur Mob truly was entwined with the evil god that Madame Pualis worshiped, then the leaders on par with Margot were either Sequence 8s, endowed with Beyonder characteristics, or they were spawn of an evil god, gifted with boons akin to a Sequence 8 Beyonder. They could even be stronger. If Lumian didn't arm himself with enough intel and set an appropriate snare, he was likely to end up on the losing side.

I can't forget I'm a Hunter, just because I've become a Provoker. Chiding himself, Lumian slipped down Avenue du Marché and strolled into the Salle de Bal Brise.
Given it was barely past three in the afternoon, the place was practically deserted. No music played, no one danced. His eyes immediately found Louis, the thug, nursing a glass of pomegranate ale at the bar counter.
"Soda?" Lumian grinned, sauntering over. "How about drinking something an adult would drink?"
Louis swiveled, meeting Ciel's amiable smile draped over the bar counter.
The sight left him momentarily stunned, as if he couldn't quite place the young man before him.
Was this the same Ciel who masked his wild ruthlessness behind a constant grin, one who'd resort to violence over the slightest disagreement?
He seemed more like a greenhorn, a naïve country boy who had just been roped into the Savoie Mob.
Louis gave his soda a wistful swirl, a bitter smile tugging at his lips.
"I've got to be at the baron's side later. Can't afford to get sloshed."
Lumian's eyes flicked to the bruised knot on Louis' forehead, a chuckle bubbling up. He pointed at his forehead, commenting, "Still nursing that bump? How long's it been?
"I ran into Wilson earlier. After I broke his arm and tossed him from the fourth floor, you'd think he'd be worse for wear. But he looked perfectly fine."
Louis was taken aback.
"You're saying Wilson's back on his feet?"
"Seems so, at least on the surface. Wanted to say hello, but he hightailed it out of there too fast." Lumian's tone carried a hint of regret.
Say hello? More like you want to rough up Wilson again and not even give the guy a chance to heal, Louis thought, but he didn't dare voice it.
His face took on a grave cast as he muttered to himself, "When we clashed with the Poison Spur Mob in the past, their wounded always bounced back in just a few days. The baron thinks they've got some Beyonders with a knack for healing. But for someone like Wilson to recover so rapidly from such serious injuries... that's unheard of."
"Could it be because you guys have never managed to put a serious dent in any of the Poison Spur Mob members?" Lumian's voice was laced with mockery.

Louis pondered, then conceded, "There have been a few, but not many. Plus, we usually don't see them again for a good long while. By then, they're all healed up."
So, Wilson's recovery outpaces even Doctor and Apothecary Beyonder powers? Lumian managed to glean a crucial tidbit from Louis's words.
Although it could point to a higher Sequence Beyonder on the corresponding pathway, it at least narrowed down some possibilities for him.
Just as Lumian was gearing up to probe the progress on gathering concoction ingredients, a stunning figure swept into the room.
A woman, ostentatiously attired, with her chestnut hair tied up, loose tendrils framing her ears, cheeks, and falling down her back. Her face was dusted with powder, black eyeliner accentuating her blue eyes, lending them a deep, decadent allure.
At present, she was decked out in a bold red dress that left little to the imagination, sequins catching the light at strategic spots.
Isn't this the chanteuse known for her bawdy songs at the Poison Spur Mob's Salle de Gristmill? Lumian did a double take.
This was the Savoie Mob's Salle de Bal Brise!
Still, Lumian couldn't be entirely sure if it was the same woman. The singer had a mole by her lips, while this woman sported one at the corner of her left eye.
"Catching your eye, is she? That 'Little Minx'?" Louis followed Lumian's gaze.
Lumian chuckled. "How about we use a more respectful moniker? Manners matter."
"You sound just like the baron sometimes," Louis mused. "Her stage name is 'Little Minx', 'Little Minx' Jenna. She's known as a 'Showy Diva'."
"And what exactly is a 'Showy Diva'?" Lumian didn't attempt to cover up his ignorance. After all, he was a newcomer to Trier, straight out of a backwater like Cordu.
Louis took a moment to recall the baron's words and then delivered smoothly, "It's all about her performance style, her acting, her flamboyant outfits. She's a standout singer."
She's a chanteuse too? Lumian probed, "She performs at the Salle de Gristmill as well?"
"Sure does. As long as she's getting paid, she'll belt out tunes in any dance hall on Rue Anarchie." As Louis spoke, "Little Minx" Jenna sauntered over.
Her blue eyes roamed the room, lingering on Lumian before moving to Louis.
"Ten songs, four verl d'or. I'll keep a third of the tips thrown on

stage."
"Deal." Louis had the baron's approval.
Only 4 verl d'or for a night's performance? Lumian found himself questioning. Had he overpaid Osta Trul?
In unfamiliar territory, he was woefully out of touch with the going rates.
Spotting his lingering gaze, Jenna swiveled her head, flashing him a grin.
"Feel free to let your eyes wander a bit lower."
She was referencing her scantily clad chest.
For Lumian, whose only exposure to such scenarios was through novels, this was uncharted territory. Yet, his face betrayed no unease. Flashing a smile, he said,
"I was merely wondering. The last time I spotted you, your mole was by your lips. Now it's nestled by your eye."
Jenna's reply came in the form of a captivating smile, which made Louis swallow hard.
"Are you from out of town?" Jenna queried.
Lumian bobbed his head in affirmation.
With a playful grin, Jenna leaned in, a finger tracing her cheek as she softly elucidated,
"It's all the rage here in Trier. Ladies often sport a faux mole. Right in the middle of the cheek for elegance, smack in the middle of the nose for audacity, at the corners of the eyes for passion, by the lips for allure, and nestled in the décolletage for secrets..."
As she spoke, she sent Lumian a saucy wink, as if to say, "Today, I'm all about passion."
Ah, Trier... Lumian could only shake his head in amazement.
Given their proximity, the intoxicating blend of Jenna's natural scent and the heady perfume she wore invaded his senses.
This led Lumian to instinctively rub his nose.
Jenna's reaction was immediate.
"Don't tell me you still have your virginity? I'm not a street girl, but for you, I might make an exception."
She took a moment to appraise Lumian, seemingly pleased with what she saw.
Virginity? Something that magically returns every morning at 6 a.m.? Lumian scoffed inwardly, his smile nonchalant.
"Right now? I'm afraid you might miss your performance tonight."
Back at the Ol' Tavern in Cordu Village, Lumian often had to match the locals in their coarseness, else he'd become the butt of their jokes.
Jenna's response was a hearty laugh and a dismissive wave of her hand.

"I'll find you after my set tonight."
With that, she sauntered off towards the modest wooden stage at the front of the dance floor, keen to get a feel for the place.
Isn't she jumping the gun a bit? Where's the agreement on a time and place? Lumian mused to himself.
She was clearly just yanking his chain!
Louis chimed in, a tinge of envy coloring his voice, "Don't fall for her act. She gets a kick out of toying with good-looking men. She won't actually follow through.
"I reckon she's Franca's sweetheart."
"Franca, 'Red Boots' Franca?" Lumian's surprise was palpable.
"Red Boots" Franca was a key figure in the Savoie Mob, ruling over Rue des Blouses Blanches, and rumored to be a woman.
"Exactly," Louis affirmed. "Franca appears to be the Boss's mistress, but she seems to swing both ways. She and 'Little Minx' are thick as thieves."
A lover's lover... Lumian once again marveled at the peculiarities of Trier.
Louis watched Jenna, now swaying gracefully on the stage, a look of longing etched on his face.
"She wasn't this mesmerizing when she first arrived in the market district. Over the past couple of years, she's become more adept at presentation, more feminine. What a shame..."
"If you manage to climb the ranks and stand toe to toe with Red Boots, you might have a shot," Lumian teased, stoking Louis's ambition. He then shifted gears, "Any luck tracking down those three items I needed?"
Louis tore his gaze away from Jenna to respond, "I was just about to tell you, we've managed to gather them all."
"That quick?" Lumian was taken aback by the Savoie Mob's efficiency.
Why not start a factory? Why stick with the mob life?
Louis elaborated, "'Rat' Christo keeps a variety of critters, some rare, some less so. Some we could take off his hands for the right price. That's how we got the lizard's eye and the snake's venom sac. The eagle's nest rock was a bonus."
"Rat" Christo, the one in charge of smuggling? Lumian mulled over this newfound information.

Louis carried on, "I'll arrange for someone to bring those three items to Auberge du Coq Doré later."
"And the cost?" Lumian was prepared to offer Louis an extra reward for his diligence.
Louis merely shook his head.
"The baron says you needn't worry about the payment. He believes your strength building equates to our Savoie Mob's strengthening."
Even without Baron Brignais spelling it out, Louis deduced his ploy of roping Lumian in. In any case, the cost was under 10 verl d'or.
So according to the baron's logic, I can have him refund the materials I require to progress to Pyromaniac? Lumian mused with a hint of sarcasm.
Louis was taking a sip from his pomegranate soda when a group sauntered into the Salle de Bal Brise.
The group's leader was strikingly tall, towering over 1.9 meters. His light-yellow hair, short and plush, clung to his scalp akin to high-grade velvet.
He had a huge nose, light-blue eyes, and a roughly textured face. He was dressed in a figure-hugging black suit, topped off with a wide-brimmed round hat.
Louis's features tightened, he carefully placed down the soda bottle, turning to Lumian, "I need to attend to the baron."
Just then, the beefy man in his early thirties walked a crew that had the air of gangsters about them towards the café's staircase.
"Who's he?" Lumian questioned, unable to hide his curiosity.
Louis rose, offhandedly answering, "That's 'Giant' Simon, runs the dance halls on Rue du Rossignol."
"Isn't he a part of our Savoie Mob as well?" Lumian probed further.
Louis nodded. "True, but he's not on good terms with the baron. He's always arguing that the baron, since he oversees the loan-sharking, ought to relinquish control of the Salle de Bal Brise.
"I'm heading up; need to see what he's here for."
Louis had barely taken two steps when he noticed Lumian, still planted at the bar counter, from his peripheral vision.
He couldn't resist an inward sigh.
He just doesn't grasp how to seize the moment. Shouldn't he have shown some initiative and backed me up with the baron? If 'Giant' Simon dares say anything unsavory, stare him down, threaten him with a gun. Only then will he start to earn the baron's trust.
Yes, he may be ruthless, mad, and powerful, but he remains a greenhorn when it comes to these things.
Naturally, if Lumian truly wanted to accompany him to the second

floor and aid Baron Brignais in maintaining appearances at the café, Louis would turn him down. After all, the baron and "Giant" Simon could potentially be discussing confidential matters concerning the Savoie Mob. It was no place for a rookie to eavesdrop.
Lumian ruminated, The Savoie Mob seems riddled with internal strife...
Suppose there's a showdown between Baron Brignais and "Giant" Simon and one bites the dust. And then the head honcho needs a strong hand to quell the storm and take over their positions, wouldn't I be the perfect candidate? When that time comes, as long as I pass muster, I'll have fulfilled Mr. K's mission.
Besides the leaders, I can't see anyone else in the Savoie Mob who could take out Margot single-handedly...
Now the trick is to pit Baron Brignais and "Giant" Simon against each other without arousing suspicion...
Lost in his strategic contemplation, Lumian requested a glass of absinthe.
Before he could savor the last of the enigmatic emerald elixir, he spotted "Giant" Simon emerging from the staircase, henchmen in tow, a thunderous expression on his face.
Well, he doesn't seem pleased... Lumian noted, retracting his gaze.
He wasn't rushing to translate his thoughts into action; he was still woefully short on the ins and outs of the Savoie Mob.
Later that evening, on his return to Auberge du Coq Doré, Madame Fels, seated at the reception desk, rose and informed him, "Monsieur Ive has arrived. He's waiting for you in the first-floor dining room, by the window."
Not bad. He came quite quickly... Lumian nodded approvingly, making his way to the small dining room opposite the lobby.
Monsieur Ive had heard tell of Ciel's eccentric yet stylish hair. On seeing him step into the dining room, he rose, all smiles.
"Monsieur Ciel, right this way."
He was a man on the cusp of his fifties. His blonde hair, streaked with silver, was neatly arranged. He sported a faded dark suit with a pair of chestnut tweed trousers. His eyes were a bright blue, and he bore a thin beard.
Lumian glanced at the cane resting against the dining table, then approached, a congenial smile playing on his lips.
"Good evening, Monsieur Ive."
Once both men were seated, Ive beckoned the waiter to begin serving.
"My apologies for the delay in visiting, I've been swamped recently," Ive expressed remorsefully.

His accent distinctly belonged to the Trier region.
Feigning ignorance, Lumian questioned, "Do you own more than one motel?"
Otherwise, what's kept him so busy?
Ive was taken aback. He hadn't anticipated that Lumian would take his polite remark literally.
He stammered, "There are... some other affairs, but they're neither here nor there."
As their conversation flowed, the waiter brought in the evening meal, a serving each.
Bean soup, pork sausage, Feynapotter rice, and a sauce that occupied a fifth of the plate.
"This is their signature meat sauce," Ive informed, bubbling with enthusiasm.
Is that all? Lumian's perception of the landlord's miserliness took a new dimension.
It didn't overly concern him, though. He dug into the Feynapotter rice, smothered in the mildly meaty sauce, laced with pepper and vinegar.
After consuming his meal for about a minute, Lumian looked up, addressing Monsieur Ive with a wry smile, "With your penny-pinching tendencies, why provide each room with sulfur?"
He purposely avoided the softer term "frugal," his tone saturated with sarcasm.
Monsieur Ive's face clouded over, evidently displeased.
He kept his emotions in check, forcing a strained smile.
"The motel is riddled with bedbugs. Nobody would stay here without the sulfur we provide."
Really? As long as the price is low enough, those hard up for cash won't fuss about a few bedbugs... Lumian casually sectioned off a piece of sausage, taking a bite.
After mulling it over a bit, he suggested, "Why not employ a couple of regular cleaners for daily cleaning? That could effectively cut down on the bedbugs."
"Two full-time cleaners would set me back 130 to 150 verl d'or a month, while a thorough cleaning once a week only costs 18 verl d'or," Monsieur Ive protested, visibly pained at the prospect.
Lumian simply smiled.
"I meant, why don't you do the cleaning yourself, get your kids to help?"
That would shave off 18 verl d'or from his weekly expenses.
Monsieur Ive appeared to mull over the proposal, seeming to see the merit in it.
However, after a reflective pause, he sighed and said, "Sadly, we're

otherwise occupied."
Doing what? Lumian didn't push for an answer.
He had already established that Ive was nothing short of a tightwad.
Monsieur Ive studied Lumian, hesitating before he offered, "I used to hand Margot 20 verl d'or weekly. Which day would you prefer?"
Lumian scoffed.
"No need to hand it over to me. Invest in an additional thorough cleaning each week."
Monsieur Ive was somewhat surprised but raised no objections. After all, the cleaning service cost only 18 verl d'or, and if contracted for twice a week, he could haggle for a better rate.
Having polished off his plate, Lumian queried,
"Do you happen to know what happened to the tenant from 504?"
He was speaking of the man who'd plastered Susanna Mattise's portrait in Charlie's room, a frequent face on Rue de la Muraille, Rue de Breda, and Rue du Rossignol, who had since moved on.
Lumian had sought this information from Madame Fels earlier, but she'd offered no insight. As far as she was concerned, her interest in tenants ceased as soon as they paid their rent and didn't damage anything.
Monsieur Ive appeared taken aback, glancing at the leftovers on his plate before replying,
"I'm not sure who you mean. I don't often visit the motel. I'm unaware of who's occupying which rooms."
That response... Smacks of guilt... Lumian's eyebrows twitched slightly, but he didn't push the issue. He watched as Monsieur Ive tidied up his plate, not a morsel of rice or a trace of sauce left behind.
After Monsieur Ive had taken his leave, Lumian emerged from the motel some 20 seconds later, tailing the landlord from a safe distance.
He tracked Monsieur Ive to a beige, six-story apartment block situated in the heart of Avenue du Marché.
From what he'd gathered from Madame Fels's usual chitchat, this was most likely Monsieur Ive's residence.
Lumian didn't rush to make a "house call". There were certain activities best carried out under the cloak of night. Moreover, he wasn't entirely sure whether the official Beyonders were still probing into Susanna Mattise's affairs or hoping to find any leads through Monsieur Ive. An accidental encounter could be rather awkward.
If it came to that, Lumian would have to make himself scarce promptly.

Under the warm glow of the streetlamps, he circled Monsieur Ive's apartment, taking in his surroundings.
What struck Lumian most was the three-story, brick-red edifice diagonally across from the apartment on the opposite side of Avenue du Marché.
The foyer, propped up by pillars, bore a sign overhead: "Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."
People streamed in continuously. Every now and then, bursts of applause and strains of music floated out, creating a lively atmosphere.
Lumian knew that this was a theater catering to common folk with its affordable ticket prices, holding a monopoly in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
An ideal spot for evading pursuit... Lumian was reminded of theater-related incidents from various novels. Grinning, he crossed the street and entered the foyer of the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Posters advertising current and upcoming plays, as well as a few past classics, adorned the walls.
As Lumian considered how best to exploit the theater, he stood there, earnestly examining the photographs, sketches, and captions.
Suddenly, a familiar face caught his eye on a poster tucked away in a corner.
Playing an extra in the background, a man with a shock of starkly blond hair, blue eyes, and a wispy beard was featured. It was none other than Monsieur Ive, the man he'd been tailing!

Chapter 157: Ancienne Cage à Pigeons

Monsieur Ive, a theater actor as well? Or merely an enthusiast? Lumian pondered the enigma.

His immediate impression was, as proprietor and landlord of the Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ive could be classified as affluent. Moreover, he managed several other enterprises, so the notion of him dabbling in acting appeared improbable. Nevertheless, taking into account Ive's proclivity for hoarding wealth and his frugal tendencies, Lumian couldn't completely rule out the possibility of the man dabbling as a minor actor during his idle hours. It was an opportunity, after all, to rake in a few more coins and avoid squandering valuable time.

Once satisfied that the small-time character indeed was Monsieur Ive, Lumian's eyes drifted to the poster's title: Forest Fairy.

From the additional script, Lumian deciphered that this was a classic production from the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, occasionally revived for new runs.

The actress portraying the Forest Fairy boasted distinct facial contours, an ethereal and captivating aura, and lake-blue eyes filled with innocence and sanctity.

However, Lumian found her less than bewitching, given her adornments of bracelet, necklace, and belt fashioned from tree branches and verdant leaves, topped off by a floral laurel crown. She stirred memories of Ava, the Spring Elf from his dreams, and Susanna Mattise with her cascading turquoise tresses.

For Lumian, these were not nostalgic musings. Especially the latter, bereft of the unusual allure her hair had once commanded, now evoked an eerie and revolting image.

Charlotte Calvino. After noting the actress's name, Lumian scrutinized the other posters for more clues.

Ultimately, he deduced that Monsieur Ive had performed in three plays at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, yet in each, he was but a mere supporting actor, easily replaced.

Entering the theater with a thoughtful demeanor, Lumian forked out ten licks for a ticket.

The Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons was a well-designed edifice. A large stage dominated the far end, illuminated by gas wall lamps, cloaked by lofty curtains and equipped with several steam-powered machines.

Neat rows of seating lined the theater, progressively ascending like terraced staircases.

Lumian took his ticket stub and located his seat.

The ongoing play was "Princess and the Beast". The actors' attire

tended towards the liberal, with hints of risqué—entirely in keeping with the aesthetic sensibilities of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Watching the performance unfold, Lumian was struck with an internal gasp of awe.
Could this be Trier's standard for acting?
Such theatrics only earn them keep in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman? What caliber do the theaters in Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra hold?
Lumian wasn't a stranger to the world of theater. Despite Aurore's homebody tendencies, even she occasionally craved the outdoors. Sometimes she borrowed a pony from Madame Pualis, or chatted with Cordu's old ladies, narrated stories to local children, and occasionally she'd even take Lumian to Darième to attend plays, opera, circus performances or visit the underground book market for creative inspiration.
In comparison to the Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, those theatrical performances seemed akin to amateur efforts.
The lead actors on the stage were simply spellbinding. Whether through their facial expressions, physical gestures, or delivered lines, they were as though plucked from the narrative's pages and set into the world of the living. Lumian, initially focused on scouting for anomalies, found himself unexpectedly engrossed in the unfolding drama. He felt a pang for the Beast's tangled turmoil of self-doubt, brutality, and torment, and for the Princess, her unspoiled innocence, kindness, and heartfelt distress.
Any one of these principal performers could easily steal the spotlight in a Darième theater.
As the curtain fell, Lumian found himself rising to his feet, clapping his approval, a twinge of disappointment in his heart that the performance had concluded so swiftly.
He detected nothing suspicious with the actors, nor could he discern anything out of the ordinary within the theater itself during his regular sojourns to the restroom during intermissions.
On exiting the Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Lumian raised his eyes to the honey-colored apartment building diagonally opposite, taking note of the yellow gas lamp glow illuminating the windows of the sixth floor.
Madame Fels had hinted that Monsieur Ive cultivated a rooftop vegetable garden as a cost-saving measure. Lumian deduced that the Ive residence must, therefore, be on the apartment building's top floor, the sixth to be exact.
After a brief scrutiny, Lumian's gaze landed on the faintest of the glowing windows.

In keeping with Ive's penny-pinching character, he probably refused to light an additional gas lamp.
Finding a secluded, dark corner, Lumian set himself up, his focus locked onto the dimly lit window, a silent sentinel awaiting any sign of activity.
As the hours wore on, a homeless man wandered by, hoping to claim this sheltered nook as his makeshift bed for the night. However, catching sight of Lumian's shadowy figure, he reluctantly shuffled off elsewhere.
Such encounters barely registered with Lumian anymore. Unperturbed, he maintained his vigil.
Close to 11 p.m., the feeble light in the window blinked out.
Roughly fifteen minutes later, Monsieur Ive, garbed in a faintly dark suit and chestnut-hued tweed trousers, materialized at the apartment door.
With cautious glances cast about him, clutching a carbide lamp, he made his way along the street's shadowy cloak towards the Underground Trier entrance a stone's throw away.
Lumian bore witness as a living statue, observing the retreating illumination of Monsieur Ive's lamp until it was swallowed by darkness.
Several minutes later, with no signs of official Beyonders tailing Monsieur Ive, Lumian arose, dusted off his attire, and crossed the Avenue du Marché towards the hidden stone staircase leading underground.
Lumian did not attempt to follow him. First and foremost, he had no source of light; his only candles were those used in ritualistic magic, their scent too conspicuous. Second, he lacked knowledge about Monsieur Ive's true capabilities, his motives for venturing into Underground Trier, or the extent of power he might command.
Retracing a few steps, Lumian melted into the shadow of a nearby building's pillar, shrouding himself in the comforting dark.
A tedious wait ensued. As midnight loomed, the blue radiance of the carbide lamp punctuated the darkness at the underground entrance.
The elongated shadow of Monsieur Ive once again graced the scene.
Just as he came to the bottom of the stone staircase, Lumian tugged his cap lower over his eyes and stepped forward, barking out, "This is a hold-up!"
The strategy behind this sudden ploy was to gauge Monsieur Ive's strength. Should the landlord be a formidable force, Lumian suspected he would merely dismiss the mugger with lethal

efficiency. In that case, Lumian would have the opportunity to make a swift exit, his greatest risks being some minor injuries and a dent in his pocket.
If, however, Monsieur Ive failed to exhibit significant ability, the faux robbery would quickly morph into a real kidnapping. Lumian would then corner the landlord in a remote pocket of the Underground Trier, demanding answers about his secretive behavior around Room 504's tenant and his nocturnal trips to the underground world.
At Lumian's gruff demand for a 'hold-up,' Monsieur Ive visibly flinched.
Seeming to accept his fate, he pulled out a worn brown leather wallet, extracting a single silver coin valued at 1 verl d'or.
An unexpected surge of avarice flooded Lumian at the sight of the silver coin. Its intricate design, with the cherubic relief on the surface and radiating lines, drew him in.
Almost against his will, he found his right hand reaching out to snatch the coin from Monsieur Ive. With a swift pivot, he spun on his heel and took off, playing the part of a robber to perfection.
Five or six steps into his escape, a niggling thought started to bother Lumian.
What sort of robber would flee after pilfering a solitary 1 verl d'or coin?
And why did I even seize the coin?
Lumian's senses abruptly reignited. Channeling Dancer's agility, he made a forceful twist of his frame and skidded to a halt.
He noticed Monsieur Ive was also on the run.
The landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré darted across Avenue du Marché and made a beeline for Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Lumian, originally preparing to pursue, abruptly dropped his pace.
Monsieur Ive, now a victim of robbery, didn't aim for the sanctuary of his home nor the aid of law enforcement in the bustling market district. Instead, he elected for the theater, situated at an angle from his dwelling!
Could it be that he perceived a more effective guard there?
Lumian's brow furrowed in contemplation.
Then, within the span of a heartbeat, he spun around and resumed his faux robber's role.
He was anxious that Monsieur Ive might rally a force capable of reclaiming his pilfered silver coin.
Given Monsieur Ive's infamous miserliness, such a response was within the realm of possibility!
Although Lumian was not particularly concerned about losing a

single verl d'or, getting caught would undoubtedly unmask his identity.
Exiting Avenue du Marché, he nonchalantly flipped the silver coin to a destitute vagabond dozing at the street's edge.
At the metallic ring, the man's eyes flickered open, resting on the gleaming piece nestled under the nearby lamplight.
Once back on Rue Anarchie, Lumian peeled off his cap and coat, tucking them under his arm as he resumed his leisurely stride.
His test had confirmed his suspicions: Monsieur Ive was no ordinary man. He possessed Beyonder abilities, albeit seemingly ill-equipped for combat. He had elected to "gift" a silver coin to an apparent burglar and retreat.
This little episode filled me with a sudden, overwhelming desire for that silver coin. A desire so fierce, I nearly abandoned my true intentions, almost succumbing to madness... Lumian reflected on the strange encounter.
It was a sensation he recognized.
He had experienced a similar one when facing Susanna Mattise.
One filled him with paralyzing fear, the other stripped him of rational thought, substituting it with raw hatred.
The similarities of these abilities' manifestations... *Could Monsieur Ive be linked to Susanna Mattise?* What fate could have befallen Room 504's tenant... The Forest Fairy, the foliage, laurels... Does Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons have ties to Susanna Mattise as well? Lumian speculated as he retraced his steps to Auberge du Coq Doré.
He slipped into the underground bar to find Charlie, glass of beer in hand, belting out a tune with a few of the inn's tenants.
"We impoverished souls, dwelling in the attic..."
Catching sight of Lumian's return, Charlie excused himself and ambled over to the counter, heaving a sigh as he began,
"You wouldn't believe what transpired this afternoon. The hotel manager nicked my drinks twice, and then had the gall to say that because of Madame Alice's situation, he couldn't promote me to an official attendant. I'm stuck as a lowly handyman. How utterly odious. Just how unlucky can I get?"
Suddenly, Charlie fell silent, muttering to himself, "Unlucky, unlucky..."
After repeating it a handful of times, he glanced up at Lumian, a look of surprise registering on his face at the sight of Lumian's subtle smile.

Chapter 158: "Report"

As he pondered on Ciel's early morning warning of potential misfortune, Charlie was dumbstruck. The very afternoon he had lost the job prospect he'd been eagerly awaiting and even squandered a few verl d'or hosting a round of drinks. The thought of it all intensified the weight on his shoulders.

Ciel's smirk hit him, and Charlie's voice instinctively dropped to a hush.

"You can predict the future?"

His forecast had hit the mark with uncanny precision!

"Didn't I tell you? Just a wild guess," Lumian stated, his lie rolling smoothly off his tongue.

Yet, it wasn't entirely untruthful. It was more an educated guess, based on the luck patterns he'd perceived. It was akin to devising the method after having the final answer.

Charlie's expression reflected his disbelief, yet he didn't challenge the claim. Instead, he asked hopefully, "Has my run of bad luck ended?"

Lumian turned, his focus shifting, and his eyes growing stormy.

His face soon mirrored the seriousness of his thoughts.

Charlie, witnessing Ciel's shift in demeanor, felt his pulse quicken and his mouth go arid with anxiety.

"What, what's going on?"

Lumian pressed his lips together before stating, "You're in for a disaster."

Charlie's countenance faltered, his complexion turning pale, a stark contrast to its earlier flush.

Lumian chuckled.

"Just pulling your leg. You may not have the best luck for a while, but you won't be particularly ill-fated either."

It suggested that even if the issue with Susanna Mattise hadn't been entirely handled, it wouldn't escalate any time soon.

Charlie couldn't quite grasp Lumian's words. "Really?"

"It's a tall tale! Believe it if you wish. No skin off my back if you don't," Lumian remarked, ordering a glass of absinthe fennel with a dismissive smile.

Lumian's nonchalant demeanor helped Charlie breathe easy. He nestled onto the bar stool next to him, sipping his rye beer.

"I had thought the whole situation wasn't quite done yet."

That's not out of the question... Lumian made no effort to unnerve Charlie further.

Charlie's gaze fell on the bar top as he murmured, "You know, in that moment, I wished to be a lowly handyman and leave the

market district ASAP."
Lumian glanced his way.
"If disaster is on its way, you won't be able to outrun it no matter where you relocate."
A raw bitterness bared itself on Charlie's face.
Lumian suggested further, "You might as well pay a visit to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and pray more.
"And by the way, I dined with our landlord, Monsieur Ive, today. He seemed a bit odd when Room 504 came up in our chat, almost as if he knows something about the previous tenant but isn't keen on sharing."
Charlie froze for a moment before comprehending Ciel's reference.
He lowered his voice again. "The one who hung that woman's portrait?"
Lumian confirmed with a slow, assertive nod.
Charlie stayed quiet for a beat before muttering, "Does that woman have any ties to Monsieur Ive? Does he suspect something off about the portrait? I-I should inform the authorities. I'll head to the nearest cathedral at dawn and speak to the priest..."
Not bad. A few days under my wing and you're much sharper than Louis from the Savoie Mob. You caught my hint right away...
Lumian raised his glass, taking a sip of the visually appealing green liquid.
Lumian was not well versed in the details of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, hence the severity of the problem was a mystery to him. Any self-led investigation would take at least a couple of weeks to gather any meaningful information. Even then, he might not possess the means to tackle it. As such, his best course of action was to alert the authorities from the get-go, allowing them to take the reins.
Once he'd reached a decision, Charlie shot a covert glance at Pavard Neeson, who was engrossed in the art of mixology. Confirming that he had the man's undivided attention, he leaned in and whispered to Lumian, "If they query the source of my information, what should I say?"
"Just tell them that it cropped up during our chat," Lumian responded candidly.
With Charlie previously singing his praises, the police in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman were aware that Auberge du Coq Doré had fallen under Ciel's jurisdiction. Thus, it was only a matter of time before Ciel and Monsieur Ive, the landlord, crossed paths over a meal and some idle chatter.
When the time came, the official Beyonders could make casual inquiries and ascertain that all was in order. They would have no

reason to cast suspicion upon Lumian.
"Alright." Charlie's demeanor noticeably relaxed.
Lumian savored another sip of his La Fée Verte before posing a question, "Which of the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob do you know?"
Charlie had previously alluded to the leaders of the Savoie Mob, the Poison Spur Mob, and several other smaller gangs having a certain notoriety in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman—enough to frighten the youngsters.
"What are you scheming?" Charlie's countenance lit up with excitement.
"I intend to ask them a question or two," Lumian chose to frame it in the most courteous manner possible.
Charlie's enthusiasm dipped a notch, realizing he wouldn't be privy to any spectacle.
"Besides Margot, I know of two others. One's 'Hammer' Ait. He was a regular at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, but he's been frequenting Rue Anarchie of late. Then there's Harman, sans any nickname. I've observed Margot in his company on multiple occasions, showing him considerable deference. He's bald, by the way.
"The head honcho of the Poison Spur Mob is 'Black Scorpion' Roger. He appears to reside somewhere on Avenue du Marché..."
Garnering Margot's respect implies Harman's status and power within the Poison Spur Mob superseded his... Perhaps "Hammer" Ait has taken control of Salle de Gristmill and Rue Anarchie, hence his regular appearances here? Lumian pondered, setting his sights on "Hammer" Ait.
His plan was to shadow the gang leader over the ensuing days, familiarizing himself with his routines and behaviors. Should he fail to locate Wilson in due course, he would contemplate making an example of Ait.
After emptying his glass of absinthe, Lumian and Charlie made their way upstairs.
Upon reaching Room 207, Lumian noticed a wooden crate, adorned with the black-painted emblem of the Savoie Mob—a bullet and a dirk—placed near the entrance.
Could it be the ingredients sent by Louis? Lumian stooped to pick up the crate, subsequently unlocking the door to the room.
As he flipped open the lid, the foul stench of bird droppings wafted up from a dark stone, accompanied a pair of eyeballs, bloodshot and haunting, and a poison sac, securely encased within a glass jar.
...

Avenue du Marché was bathed in a yellowish glow thanks to the gas lamps.
Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, was guiding someone towards a vagrant, slumbering soundly with eyes tightly shut.
"Here lies my silver coin!" he pronounced.
The person behind him threw a skeptical glance towards the sleeping tramp and queried, "Did he rob you?"
"Absolutely not," Ive replied with firm conviction. "The differences in height, physique, even clothing are too significant."
"A robber that tosses stolen loot to a tramp... this situation is undeniably peculiar." The figure, teetering on the edge of the lamp's glow, nodded in near imperceptibility. "We must remain vigilant, prepared for unforeseen complications or potential investigations."
Ive simply grunted his agreement, grumbling under his breath, "Had he not cast my silver coin to this vagrant, we could have traced him directly."
He possessed the unique capability to sense the location of his possessions, but only for a limited time.
...
The following morning found Lumian holed up in Auberge du Coq Doré, engrossed in Aurore's grimoire.
He needed to keep an eye on "Hammer" Ait and his cohorts, which meant altering his study routine to the morning. These gangsters only made their appearance in the afternoon, and their nightly escapades ended in the early morning hours.
Charlie had left at dawn for the closest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral. Upon his return, his calm demeanor was underscored by a radiant smile; he seemed to have found a source of solace and received validation.
As the clock approached noon, Lumian stowed his grimoire and ambled over to Avenue du Marché. He positioned himself a short distance from Monsieur Ive's apartment and the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, hoping to witness any activity from the official Beyonders.
The streets were bustling as usual, the shops brimming with activity, and carriages weaving in and out. Yet, none bore any hints of the recent events.
After observing for some time, Lumian was about to seek out a restaurant to satiate his hunger when he spotted Monsieur Ive in the distance.
Still clad in his faded formal suit and chestnut tweed trousers, donning a gray wide-brimmed hat, and grasping a black cane, he made his way towards his apartment.

The official Beyonders haven't made their move yet? Lumian contemplated briefly before crossing Avenue du Marché to intercept the landlord.
"Good afternoon, Monsieur Ive. Out on an errand?" he greeted, all smiles.
Monsieur Ive looked slightly disoriented before scrutinizing Lumian, a touch of trepidation in his gaze.
"I'd something to attend to at the police station."
So, the official Beyonders roped in Monsieur Ive through the police station, but delegated the interrogation to someone with the required abilities? Lumian surmised the situation, albeit with a lingering query: The officials didn't uncover that Monsieur Ive possessed Beyonder powers?
Lumian responded with a gentle nod and a reassuring smile.
"Is there something I could assist you with?"
"No need," Monsieur Ive responded, his tone veering between guarded and resistant.
He gestured towards the beige apartment.
"I need to get home."
In an effort to not arouse any suspicion, Lumian made no further attempts to detain or probe him.
As Monsieur Ive walked away, Lumian was left behind, a slight furrow marking his brow.
Looking back at their brief exchange, nothing seemed off. Yet, certain details felt out of place, leaving him with a peculiar sensation.
On impulse, Lumian shifted his focus to the retreating figure of Monsieur Ive, attempting to gauge his recent string of luck.
It seemed pretty ordinary; nothing too fortunate or adverse.
Nonetheless, Lumian found his suspicion intensifying rather than alleviating.
During their dinner the previous night, Lumian had instinctively assessed Monsieur Ive's luck.
It had leaned towards the unfortunate end of the spectrum!
And now, in a span of a day, his luck had taken a turn for the better. *What could've transpired?* Lost in thought, Lumian sauntered down Avenue du Marché, his hands nonchalantly tucked into his pockets.

Chapter 159: Savage

The tide of fortune seems to have taken a turn for Monsieur Ive...
His handling of the robbery the previous night must have laid bare his secret, especially in the face of a disguised Beyonder masquerading as a police officer...
Had they sniffed out something amiss and laid a trap in anticipation?
The gears in Lumian's head whirred ever faster, his growing suspicion suggesting that his 'robbery' attempt on Monsieur Ive had alerted the man and his unseen benefactors.
Still, he couldn't verify any peculiarity regarding the landlord without attempting some sleuthing.
Realizing the eyes of the figure at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons could be upon him, Lumian abandoned the thought of paying a 'visit' to Monsieur Ive, making a hasty exit from Avenue du Marché.
An urgency overwhelmed him to execute the Prophecy Spell in order to unravel some of the mysteries plaguing him.
...
Within the confines of Quartier de l'Observatoire, near the subterranean cemetery, warmed by a flickering bonfire, Lumian spotted Osta Trul's peculiar stance. "Did you manage to procure the items I asked for?"
Osta responded with a genuine grin, "Indeed. The entrails of a lynx, tongue of a hyena, marrow of a stag, and some gray henbane. It all amounts to 5 verl d'or. Including the reward you pledged, it comes to 20 verl d'or."
Per their agreement, Lumian was to hand him an extra 5 verl d'or for each item. But, noticing the sum worth of the items was only 5 verl d'or, Osta's conscience wouldn't allow him to charge full price, hence the discount.
Lumian didn't mind. The arrangement saved him a great deal of time.
Naturally, he didn't push to pay more, handing Osta a sum of banknotes amounting to the quoted price of 20 verl d'or.
The four items were contained in either modest glassware or small wooden boxes and cloth bags. Lumian inspected them individually before sliding them into his pocket.
His gaze once again fell on Osta Trul. "Any further insights on the aquatic monster?"
Osta nodded. "Indeed."
His expression bore a plea for affirmation.
"In my effort to gather more information about the aquatic

monsters, I even ventured into the underground river myself. Regrettably, the ground was treacherous, and I ended up taking a tumble."
He pulled up his sleeve, revealing the distinct marks of his slip on his forearm.
So that's why his posture seemed off... If I hadn't requested Osta to gather information on the aquatic monster, would he have avoided the injury? Yet I only enlisted him after foreseeing an imminent accident. *What could have transpired if I had rescinded?*
A feeling of inevitability wrapped Lumian.
He was also a pawn in the game of destiny, his actions and will embedded in the luck he sensed.
Lumian curtailed his musing and responded with a light chuckle.
"I did advise you to be cautious."
"Uh..." Osta appeared taken aback.
The recollection of Ciel's warning for the upcoming days suddenly sprung to mind.
Did it manifest so rapidly? Is his divination prowess truly this potent? Amid his astonishment, Osta queried, "You divined I would be injured within the next two days?"
What Sequence does Ciel belong to?
Not only does he appear combat-savvy, but his divination skills are impressive!
A grin played at the corners of Lumian's mouth.
"It's not divination."
He held back further explanation, leaving Osta to his own conjectures.
Seeming to take the hint, Osta didn't press further. Instead, he shifted the conversation back to the aquatic monster.
"I've been able to piece together the whispers and conjecture, and it seems there are three kinds of aquatic monsters in the underground river:
"The first appears to be a drowned corpse, bloated and eerily pale. The second resembles a grotesquely mutated fish, standing nearly as tall as a man, covered in sturdy scales that seem impervious to harm. The third bears an uncanny resemblance to strands of black hair floating atop the water, only to suddenly reach out and ensnare the unwary souls on the banks, dragging them under.
"These aquatic monsters, however, aren't particularly formidable. Most of their attacks on humans end in failure, which accounts for the abundance of tales and rumors.
"They're an elusive lot. Sometimes seen two or three times a month, sometimes they disappear entirely. I ventured down there last night myself, but aside from my unfortunate slip, I found no

trace of them."
Lumian scoffed at this, saying, "With your level of combat prowess, I wouldn't bet on your return if you ran into one of them."
Osta only managed a sheepish smile in response, not deigning to refute the comment.
The only reason he dared to venture there was due to the aquatic monsters' reputed weakness and his own divination.
Lumian's brow furrowed in contemplation. Given the aquatic monsters' record, any Beyonder team from the two Churches or Bureau 8 could effortlessly eradicate them. So, why were they still prevalent?
If the underground river concealed a greater peril, any poor soul encountering the aquatic monster should have no chance of escape.
As these thoughts spun in his mind, Lumian took the materials Osta Trul had provided and carefully concealed them between a pair of nearby rocks.
He was cautious, thinking that should he engage in a heated battle with the aquatic creature in the future, these delicate items might get damaged.
Afterward, Lumian handed Osta a 5 verl d'or note.
"This is for your insights about the aquatic monsters."
Lumian picked up his carbide lamp and, following Osta's instructions and the tunnel signs, began his journey towards the underground river.
A few moments of hesitation later, Osta quickly rose, grabbing his own carbide lamp and hurriedly following Lumian.
Upon hearing the rapid footsteps, Lumian spun around, his puzzled gaze landing on Osta.
Osta managed a strained smile and said, "I'll come with you. I might be of some assistance."
"You?" Lumian couldn't veil his incredulous disdain.
Osta cleared his throat before divulging his actual motive.
"The aquatic monster is a spiritual being. It's improbable that you'll want everything. I-I'm hoping to scavenge what you leave behind."
If fortune smiled upon him and he found a buyer for the parts, he could make a tidy sum of more than ten verl d'or!
Lumian merely stared at Osta, letting the tension build before finally breaking into a grin.
"You're welcome to tag along, but don't expect me to play your bodyguard."
From what he could discern, Osta's luck was veering away from a bloody end and instead showing promise of a minor financial windfall.

Essentially, if Osta joined him on this underground river expedition, it implied that the hunt might be relatively safe and potentially lucrative.
Of course, Lumian couldn't be entirely sure that his decision wouldn't sway the course of Osta's luck.
"No problem." Osta replied, devoid of apprehension.
In his mind, he'd merely be tailing Ciel from a distance. If they happened to encounter an aquatic monster, he'd simply keep a wider berth. The threat to his own life seemed minimal at best.
Osta's unwavering resolution prompted Lumian to study him a moment longer.
Seeing that his luck hadn't shifted, Lumian lifted his gaze, picked up his carbide lamp and resumed his journey forward.
In a way, having someone like Osta trailing behind had its benefits.
Sometimes, the art of fishing required bait. On other occasions, in the face of a formidable monster, one needn't outrun the beast. One just needed to outpace their so-called allies!
The two of them ventured deeper into the subterranean world, each step guided by the flickering light of their carbide lamps.
After roughly ten minutes, they were engulfed by an escalating humidity, and Lumian could discern the faint murmur of flowing water.
He held his lamp aloft, casting an eye over the tunnel signage before veering into a pathway shrouded in darkness to his right.
Soon, the telltale shimmer of water, distorted by the lamp's radiance, beckoned ahead.
Lumian approached the underground river with caution.
It stretched five to six meters wide, ensconced beneath a naturally-formed stone dome peppered with stalactites. The water was relatively clear, meandering through the carved gullies.
Apart from a scattering of moss, Lumian detected no signs of life at first glance.
Osta had already ceased advancing, observing from a safe distance as the dangerous Beyonder meticulously combed through the riverside.
The pair maintained a distance of over ten meters, sporadically progressing and halting.
Fifteen minutes elapsed, and Lumian's search bore no fruit.
Half an hour passed, and the situation remained unchanged.
As the path ahead began to constrict, Lumian's keen eye spotted some anomalies.
By the riverbank, several rocks lay scattered, their edges tinged with soil.

A struggle here? This thought nudged Lumian's heart as he cautiously neared the area.
He crouched down, setting the carbide lamp aside and examined the vicinity with careful scrutiny.
Soon enough, he discovered a pair of footprints and signs of something being dragged away.
Yet, where these traces led, the river flowed transparent and calm. The riverbed was clearly visible and bore no hint of lurking dangers.
Drip. A solitary droplet of liquid landed on Lumian's nape.
It was chilly and adhesive.
An immediate sense of peril overwhelmed Lumian. Without delay, he jerked his head upwards.
In the cavernous interlude between stalactites, a glistening figure of grayish-white writhed.
Its head resembled a python, the body slick with scales akin to a fish. From where fins should have been, emerged two arms and a single leg, eerily human-like.
The monster's mouth gaped open, unveiling a neat row of ferocious white teeth. From its mouth corner dripped a viscous and foul-smelling liquid.
In the following heartbeat, the monster pounced, soaring towards Lumian.
Crouched on the ground, Lumian tumbled backwards.
Simultaneously, his body coiled like a spring, catapulting his right leg upwards in a swift whip-like motion.
With a satisfying crack, Lumian, teetering on the brink of falling, landed a solid kick on the airborne monster who failed to evade the strike, hurling it towards the opposing stone wall.
Crash!
The monster collided with the rocky facade.
Lumian was back on his feet, charging at his opponent with the feral urgency of a cheetah.
As the monster slid off the wall, Lumian's form was mirrored in its muddy yellow eyes.
Lumian reached out, seizing its arm.
The monster didn't evade but opened its palm to welcome the assault.
Each of its digits sprouted sharp scales, glinting ominously with a deep blue sheen.
Without warning, Lumian twisted his elbow and flicked his wrist, clasping the monster's wrist with both hands to thwart the menacing blue scales.
He then extended his right foot, sweeping away the monster's lone

leg.
With just one leg, the monster was powerless to resist. Its only option was to harness Lumian's grip on its wrist to propel itself upward, its solitary leg trailing behind and its monstrous maw leading the charge, ready to devour Lumian's entire head.
At this critical moment, Lumian relinquished his hold, lowered his stance, and rolled towards the stone wall.
Thud!
The aquatic monster landed heavily behind him.
In a fluid motion, Lumian swiveled, snatching the monster's leg. Channeling his strength from the core, he swung it towards the stone wall.
Crash!
The monster's skull crumpled upon impact.
Lumian didn't pause. He maintained his swinging momentum, battering the monster against the pillar, the wall, and the floor, with dark red blood and pale yellow fluid splattering everywhere.
Amid the pounding sounds, craters formed on the stone wall, and the monster's skull started to fragment, the contents spilling out in a gruesome red tide.
More than ten meters away, Osta Trul stood agape, utterly mesmerized by the violent spectacle.
How savage!
Incredible!
Thump! Lumian unceremoniously dropped the mutilated, lifeless aquatic monster onto the ground.

Chapter 160: Pervert

Osta Trul had never questioned Ciel's competence in tackling the aquatic monster, yet the ruthless efficiency with which he dispatched it caught him off guard.

It felt much like witnessing an adult landing a blow on a child.

A persistent inquiry bobbed to the surface of Osta's thoughts.

To what path and Sequence could Ciel possibly belong?

Why could he engage in combat and appear to wield formidable prophetic capabilities?

Within a region speckled by dark-crimson and dull-golden symbols, Lumian crouched, brandishing his ceremonial silver dagger. He slid the blade into the monster's open wound, cleaving through its flesh, and deposited it in the hollow timber container prepared earlier.

Once two containers brimmed with the monster's flesh and scales casting a dim cerulean glow, he uncapped a metallic flask and began collecting the monster's blood that burbled ceaselessly.

Witnessing this, Osta methodically closed the gap between him and the vanquished monster, lingering nearby.

Before too long, Lumian rose, pivoted, and retraced his steps.

Scrambling, Osta hastily crouched and started amassing blood, scales, and what he believed to be spiritually rich organs.

His gaze frequently darted to Lumian, who was steadily increasing his distance, showing no signs of halting for Osta.

A sense of unease began to seep into Osta.

After all, Ciel had dispatched the aquatic monster with terrifying ease. Given his earlier performance, Osta feared that Ciel could also eliminate him without much effort. Should he remain alone by this subterranean river in the depth of the darkness, and should another monster be lured by the scent of blood, he would find himself in dire straits!

With a sense of urgency, Osta hastily stowed the harvested materials, not daring to dawdle. Fighting the temptation to salvage more of the monster's remains, he left a good 90% behind and hurried after Lumian.

As their carbide lamps winked out at the tunnel's end, darkness reclaimed the area, save for the perpetual whisper of water.

After an indeterminate time had passed, a group of thrill-seeking university students made their way through the cavernous labyrinth, kerosene lanterns in hand.

They discovered a partially collapsed stone wall and a pathway disordered and fragmented.

Apart from that, all was serene and silent. Not a trace of the

aquatic monster or blood stains were found.
...
Having bid Osta Trul adieu, Lumian found himself a seat in a public carriage, bound for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Retrieving the remainder of his ingredients from Auberge du Coq Doré's Room 207, he grasped his carbide lamp and plunged once more into the realm below ground.
His destination was the former site of the ritual, a quarry cave. His goal was to prepare the mysterious concoction required for the Prophecy Spell before the veil of night descended. Come nightfall, he intended to make his way to the nearest hospital, and procure a recently departed body from the morgue.
As Lumian descended from the floor, mimicking the surface world, his pace slackened.
Under the glow of the carbide lamp, he noticed fresh, evident footprints marking the slightly damp path.
Heavy footprints... Lumian studied them for a moment, voicing his puzzlement.
From the looks of these prints, he concluded that the passerby must've weighed upwards of 100 kilograms, or been shouldering something hefty.
Who could it be? An underworld smuggler? Lumian had his suspicions, but he didn't intend to tail them.
Trier's subterranean labyrinth was brimming with people. Obsessing over each footprint would only exhaust him.
Besides, the other party had no quarrel with him. Provided they didn't interfere with his upcoming ritual magic, he had no concern even if he was ready to ensure their silence.
Turning the lamp's dial, Lumian tempered the reaction between carbide and water, thus dimming the flame's intensity and casting less light.
He was concerned that the maker of the footprints was near, and might detect the bright light closing in from behind.
Continuing his journey, Lumian suddenly halted, nose twitching.
He detected a familiar aroma.
A musky perfume designed to awaken masculine desires, intermingled with a citrus hint.
After a brief moment of mental rifling, Lumian identified the scent's owner.
Little Minx Jenna, the Showy Diva!
Could these be her footprints? Preposterous. Surely she doesn't weigh more than 100 kilograms? She's not cast of iron! Besides, the prints were clearly a man's... Lumian mulled over two possibilities.

Either Jenna is adept at concealing her tracks, leaving no corresponding marks, or she's been hoisted by a man...
It's quite ordinary for two individuals collectively to exceed 100 kilograms...
Judging by the footprints, the man stands between 1.65 and 1.7 meters tall. His gait seems slightly peculiar...
As Lumian turned this over in his mind, his brow furrowed.
Piqued by curiosity, he resolved to tail the trail and ascertain what predicament Jenna had stumbled upon, or rather, what scheme she was brewing.
It was crucial to note that this Showy Diva was suspected of being Franca's paramour. Her entanglement might reveal a clandestine secret of the Savoie Mob.
This could potentially provide Lumian, who was pursuing "loftier heights," with an opportunity.
Lowering the carbide lamp's intensity further, he hoped that once switched off, the flame would snuff out promptly.
Sticking to the tunnel's shadows, he tracked the footprints, vigilantly gauging the distance. Should anything go awry, he was ready to extinguish the light.
As the footprints appeared increasingly fresh, as though only moments old, he extinguished the carbide lamp and ventured forward in the darkness, relying on his memorized path.
Before he knew it, Lumian had reached a divergence in the path, a faint blue light emanating from the stone wall's end on his left side.
Slipping his black gloves on, Lumian inched closer, a wraith in the shadows.
The blue light radiated from a small cave nestled at the end of the stone wall.
Stationed against the stone, Lumian tucked himself into the shadow's embrace, craning his neck ever so slightly to catch a glimpse of what lay within.
At the cave's heart, a rather primitive iron-black carbide lamp sat in a relatively flat expanse.
Nearby, a capacious bag of grayish-white fabric bulged, seemingly at its full capacity.
A man loomed beside the bag, adorned in a blue cap, a common tweed suit of brown that one would see in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, with a linen shirt peeking out from beneath his darker jacket.
The man's breathing was noticeably labored. Standing nearly 1.7 meters tall, his side profile revealed a thin and slightly worn countenance, his brown eyes ablaze with unmasked desire.

Lumian's gaze dropped, registering the man's arousal.
He inwardly chided, Impatient, aren't we? No wonder he was lagging. That explains the irregularity in his footprints.
Lumian grew more convinced that the bag concealed none other than Jenna, the Little Minx.
She must have fallen prey to a kidnapper and rapist.
The man proceeded to remove his cap, casting it aside as his heavy panting echoed through the cave.
His countenance was laid bare before Lumian.
His eyebrows, pale and disordered, were sparse. His eyes sagged slightly at the corners. His nose was a hint of red at the tip, and his mouth bore dry, cracked lips. His complexion was a shade too pale, betraying signs of fatigue and exertion.
The man squatted, loosening the bag's ties, revealing its contents.
Lumian's intuition proved correct—it was indeed Jenna, the "Showy Diva."
Her customarily tied brownish-yellow hair was in disarray, cascading over her body. Her eyes were sealed shut, framed by a layer of deep shadows. Adorned in a white blouse and a beige fluffy short skirt, it was unclear whether she had lost or hadn't yet donned her mole.
As the man drew Jenna from the bag, his breathing was so labored that Lumian could discern it effortlessly, even if he wasn't a Hunter.
Such a strong desire... bordering on the perverse... Lumian found himself thinking this almost subconsciously.
Stumbling upon such a scenario, he resolved to come to Jenna's aid while he was here. If the Savoie Mob's boss ever considered appointing a new leader, "Red Boots" Franca might vouch for him.
But a hasty rescue wasn't on his agenda. Lumian intended to observe further, ascertain whether the man possessed any unique abilities that emboldened him to cross a leader of the Savoie Mob, "Red Boots" Franca.
He would swoop in once the man was mid-stripping, incapacitated in his haste.
If only I had a long-range weapon. This wouldn't be such a chore...
Lumian heaved a sigh, pondering on getting the Savoie Mob to supply him with a firearm.
The man's hands found their way to Jenna's face, patting it lightly twice.
Next, he withdrew a small metal bottle, unscrewing the cap and brought it to Jenna's nose.
Achoo!
A sneeze jolted Jenna awake, her eyes fluttering open.

The man's visage reflected in her wide blue eyes, sparking alarm. An instinctive urge to rise seized her.
But in the next moment, she registered the absence of strength in her body, rendering resistance futile.
"Damn you, dog sh*t, what do you think you're doing?" Jenna mustered enough strength to spit out the words.
A twisted smile spread across the man's face.
"Do you know? I've watched you sing countless times. Each time, the desire to tear away your clothing and have you perform solely for me is overwhelming."
Jenna hurled back, her voice seething with rage, "You lunatic, a bastard who deserves being f*cked by a donkey! You're done for! The Savoie Mob will have you sleeping with the fishes!"
The man remained silent, his brown eyes gleaming with a peculiar light.
Jenna's cheeks flushed crimson, and her breathing grew shallow.
Her body twitched involuntarily, her eyes widening in shock at her own reaction.
"This is just perfect. Not only a hint of resistance but a subconscious acquiescence too..." The man stood up, brimming with anticipation, rapidly disrobing his clothes, trousers, and shoes.
Lumian, observing from his hidden spot, felt a sudden jolt of alarm.
Jenna's reaction is abnormal! *Could she be under the influence of some Beyonder power?*
Did every human and dog in Trier have access to Beyonder powers?
Has Jenna been coerced into arousal? This... This bears an uncanny resemblance to Susanna Mattise and Monsieur Ive's act...
Lumian's thoughts spiraled as he drew out the ritual silver dagger, tucking it into his right pocket with the blade pointed inward and the hilt pressing against the outer cloth.
Lowering his body, he silently moved from the stone wall into the cave, stealthily approaching the man from the shadow's edge.
The man's attention was fully riveted on Jenna. His eyes blazed with a fanatic light, his face twisted into a perverse grin. As he worked his belt loose and shed his trousers, his gaze roved over Jenna's form.
Emerging from the shadows, Lumian sprang forth like a cheetah on the prowl.

Chapter 161: Special Traits

It was only when Lumian sprung from the darkness that the man—his gaze fixated solely on Jenna—realized the invasion of his secluded lair.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Lumian stormed in, raining a barrage of fists, elbows, knees, and feet upon the intruder.

The man was taken aback, yet not feeble. His resistance was robust, fending off blows with forearms while retreating. His chest, calves, and thighs bore the brunt of Lumian's missed strikes, but he held his ground.

With a shake of his head, his brown eyes morphed into a haunting green, casting an eerie reflection of Lumian.

Suddenly, Lumian was overwhelmed by a powerful surge of desire. Beside him, "Showy Diva" Jenna radiated a captivating allure as she strained to watch the struggle, her whole being pulsating with magnetism.

This desire exploded within Lumian like a live grenade. He ceased his assault, eyes smoldering with a reddish hue as his breaths quickened. Whirling around, he lunged towards Jenna.

Jenna sensed the abnormality and bellowed out, her voice a mix of anger and fear, "Pull yourself f*cking together!"

But her words were smothered as Lumian pinned her down.

In tandem with this action, a hard object pressed against Lumian's right side.

What was that? Reacting instinctively, his hand grazed the hilt of the ritual silver dagger he'd strategically placed for self-injury.

A vague understanding of his intent to use it flickered back into his mind.

In the next heartbeat, Lumian—now mostly irrational from his burgeoning desire—seized the handle of the silver dagger and drove it into his own flesh.

The silver tip sliced through cloth, skin, and muscle alike.

Excruciating pain thundered into Lumian's consciousness, restoring some rationality from the grips of his wild desire, allowing him to regain some lucidity.

Pretending nothing had changed, he continued his actions on Jenna, his hands wandering aimlessly.

"Are you f*cking useless? Can't even handle a pervert!" Jenna scolded, hoping to jolt her lone protector back to reality.

Seeing his opponent under control, the man hastily retrieved his own concealed dagger, preparing to strike Lumian from behind.

Just then, Lumian's hands slid and he steadied himself against the cool cave floor beside Jenna.

With a swift motion, he flexed his waist and kicked his right foot backward.
Whack!
Lumian struck, his attack to the man's groin swift and precise, akin to a whip's snap.
A guttural crunch echoed, the man's visage draining of color as pain contorted his features.
Clatter! His weapon slipped from his grasp.
He crumpled to the ground, writhing as he clutched his violated area, rendered helpless in the throes of debilitating agony.
Not one to squander an advantage, Lumian lunged, ensnaring his prey in a swift embrace.
His right arm snaked up, seizing the man's head and wrenching it with an unyielding force.
Crack!
The man was granted a view of his own back, his focus mercifully diverted from the torment below.
Once his adversary's life was unequivocally extinguished, Lumian withdrew his arms and produced his ritual silver dagger. With a white bandage he had in his possession, he attended to his own wound.
He held no fear of infection—even if such an eventuality arose, his Provoker constitution would endure until the 6 a.m. of the next day.
The primary purpose of his first-aid efforts was to prevent the cave from retaining traces of blood.
Jenna, sprawled on the cold ground, mustered the strength to hoist herself up. She observed as Lumian retracted his deadly grip and the man crumpled lifelessly to the ground.
Just like that? A shiver of shock rippled through her, effectively quelling her previously stoked desires.
She was no naive observer. She had gauged the formidable, almost magical aura of that lecherous man, but he was annihilated in mere seconds by this handsome rural lad!
Barely a heartbeat—eight or nine seconds at most—had transpired before a life was extinguished.
Upon tending to his injury, Lumian collected the man's outer garments and moved towards Jenna. She blinked out of her stupor and queried curiously, "Why are you here?"
Almost reflexively, she added jokingly, "Don't say you're enamored by me and have been trailing me?"
Lumian's response was a soft chuckle as he squatted down, drawing Jenna's hands behind her back.
"What are you doing?" Jenna's voice teetered on panic.

Despite her feeble struggles, Lumian effortlessly secured her wrists using the man's shirt.
In the blink of an eye, he pulled a dark jacket over Jenna's head, blocking her sight completely.
"Dogsh*t, bastard, pervert, what do you want?" Jenna's words tumbled out, a jumble of anger, anxiety, and confusion.
Lumian dismissed her outburst. Ripping off the remaining piece of his shirt, he wadded it up and thrust it into Jenna's ears and mouth.
"Mmmmm..." Jenna was silenced.
A resignation washed over her as she thought, Fine, I'll endure this like a dog bite. As long as he doesn't kill me...
Yet, her apprehension was met with stillness. Lumian had risen, leaving her side to approach the lifeless form on the cave floor.
Upon purifying his ritual silver dagger and wiping it clean, Lumian circumnavigated the petite cave, weaving a wall of spirituality.
Next, he commenced the Summoning Dance.
His intention was to invoke a spirit via this rite!
Despite this method's efficacy falling notably short compared to traditional psychic spells, the goal of the Summoning Dance wasn't strictly spirit invocation. Nevertheless, it was far better than the alternative—doing nothing.
His spirituality melded with natural forces and diffused in every direction, but was confined within the wall of spirituality enveloping the cave.
Thus, the summoning wouldn't attract any unwanted entities.
In the midst of the chaotic, mesmerizing dance, Lumian perceived the spectral form of the man.
Drawing the ritual silver dagger, he let a droplet of blood fall, commanding the spirit to bond with him.
Almost instantaneously, Lumian was gripped by a chilling sensation as an unusual and fervent heat ignited within him. This was accompanied by an overwhelming desire for women.
Is this an actual side-effect? Does it parallel the insatiable hunger experienced with the mouth-orifice monster? Lumian made a conscious effort to avoid glancing at Jenna, who was now bound and blindfolded, as he noted his newly acquired "head."
Since the man had recently perished, his other "head" was saturated with lingering emotions such as lust, pain, fury, loathing, and the instinctive urge to utilize his distinctive traits. Also present were traces of obsessions and the most profound memories.
Analyzing the situation, Lumian understood that this pervert possessed far more abilities and traits than the mouth-orifice

monster.
"Inciting avarice in others;
"Becoming miserly and greedy, able to detect items that once belonged to him;
"Stimulating others' appetites;
"Maintaining a robust and healthy physical state;
"Existing in perpetual hunger and thirst;
"Constantly utilizing mental faculties to augment strength, reflexes, agility, and resilience;
"Employing one's gaze, speech, and actions to subtly induce a measure of lust in the target.
"Through direct contact and spell-like abilities, the target will experience varying degrees of lust.
"Preparing rape drugs and the like.
"Differentiating hormonal information of various individuals..."
Did Monsieur Ive utilize the first one? This pervert is indeed connected to Monsieur Ive and Susanna Mattise... A constant state of hunger and thirst. No wonder he targeted Jenna and dared to abduct her. *Can this be categorized as a negative effect?* Indeed, Jenna may not be his first victim... Lumian didn't select any specific trait. He was limited to general observations of the spectral companion and was unable to comprehend any of the more nuanced abilities.
Lumian made an attempt to amplify the man's most profound memories.
Suddenly, he was in the midst of a bustling theater. On stage stood a young woman clad in a divine white dress, her deeply carved features accented by lake-like eyes, crystal clear and rippling with innocence and charm.
Charlotte Calvino... Lumian identified the woman instantly. She was the reigning star of the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Simultaneously, Lumian felt the man's excitement, the predatory hunger within him intensifying.
However, with the crowd around, he refrained from any untoward behavior. He bolted to the lavatory as soon as the scene concluded.
As the memory faded, Lumian ceased the Summoning Dance, letting the man's spirit withdraw from his being.
Almost immediately, he performed the Summoning Dance again, inviting the spirit to rejoin him.
This was because each possession allowed Lumian to select only one trait, one memory, or one obsession. Once chosen, it was irrevocable.
Lumian had opted for one of the spirit's most poignant memories.
In the next instant, Jenna appeared before him, giving an overtly

dramatic performance on-stage.
"..." The situation became clear to Lumian. He couldn't resist clenching his jaw and cursing, "Is there nothing else in your mind but women, women, women!"
He abandoned the idea of spirit channeling, regretting that he hadn't yet achieved the status of a Contractee, unable to forge a long-term contract with the spirit and borrow a skill. Lumian appraised the man's traits, certain that some of them would prove immensely useful in combat.
If only I could rear this spirit... Lumian sighed, conceding his present limitations.
Subsequently, he dissolved the spiritual barrier, sheathed his ritual silver dagger, and returned to Jenna. He removed the jacket shrouding her eyes and the shirt binding her hands.
Jenna winced, plucking the cloth from her mouth and ears.
She massaged her reddened wrist, throwing a skeptical look at Lumian who was busy searching the pockets of the man's clothing. She inquired, "Why did you blindfold me and block my ears earlier?"
"I was protecting you. You shouldn't see or hear what isn't meant for you," Lumian responded in a half-jesting tone, his search yielding a total of 8 verl d'or coins and three somewhat antiquated metal canisters.
Perceiving no threat from him, Jenna huffed. "What could possibly be unseen or unheard here? Unless you... you didn't... with the corpse..."
Her voice faded as she connected a few dots, roughly guessing that Lumian might have been using some power to extract information from the corpse.
Upon noticing Lumian evaluating the three metal canisters, Jenna deflected the topic and reminisced, "One of these bottles contains a gas that knocks you out, leaving you feeble. That's how he abducted me.
"Also, another bottle has this gas, extremely foul-smelling but strangely enough, it wakes you up. Damn, that pervert deserves being f*cked by a donkey!
"I don't know what's in the remaining bottle, and I can't distinguish between the other two."

Chapter 162: Fresh Corpse

Lumian crouched down, clutching the three metal canisters in his hands. He cast a glance at Jenna, a mischievous smile playing on his lips.

"I know just the way to confirm it."

"What..." Jenna's curiosity piqued, but soon a hint of nervousness and panic crept into her expression, triggered by Lumian's enigmatic smile.

Unfazed by her reaction, Lumian responded with a smile of his own.

"Help me determine which canister is which," he suggested.

"What sort of joke is this?" Jenna thought, grateful for the fact that had Lumian not saved her and aware of her own weakened state, she would have unleashed a stream of curses.

However, Lumian's expression turned serious.

"Rest assured, if it contains the gas that knocks you out, the worst that can happen is you fainting again. I won't harm you, and even if I wanted to, you wouldn't be able to resist. Besides, once we ascertain which canister is which, I can use a stimulating gas to revive you and bring you back to normal."

"If luck is on your side and you encounter the stimulating gas, you'll regain most of your strength immediately," Lumian added.

That makes sense. Regardless of the outcome, it can't possibly be harmful. She was almost convinced by Lumian's words.

However, snapping out of her daze, Jenna clenched her teeth and voiced her concerns.

"But what if you end up selecting the other canister? We have no idea what it contains!"

If it turned out to be poisonous gas, there was no one present with the knowledge to treat her.

Lumian responded with a mocking tone, a smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth, "Are you daft? Canisters filled mostly with gas and those containing liquid have a significant weight difference!"

"This particular bottle should be filled with liquid!"

He picked up one of the metal canisters and gave it a slight shake.

He "clearly" heard the unmistakable sloshing sound of liquid inside before pocketing it.

"Is that so..." Although Jenna had been mocked, her attention was focused on the "experiment," and anger didn't consume her.

After a few seconds of hesitation, she closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly, determined.

"Go ahead, give it a try!"

Lumian stowed one of the metal bottles in his pants pocket, leaving only one in his grasp.
With a leisurely pace, he brought it near Jenna's nose.
In the next moment, Jenna slowly cracked open her eyes.
Lumian chuckled, twisting open the cap.
In an instant, an intensely pungent odor, reminiscent of fermented excrement, assailed Jenna's senses, causing her to sneeze repeatedly. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, and her nose threatened to drip.
However, each sneeze served as a catalyst, restoring a significant portion of her strength. As Lumian sealed the canister and rose from his crouch, Jenna leaped to her feet, instinctively stretching her limbs.
Jenna happily adjusted her clothing and skirt, muttering to herself, "Seems like luck is on my side!"
On her first attempt, she managed to obtain the canister with the foul-smelling gas.
But then she noticed Lumian's playful expression.
Jenna's heart skipped a beat, sensing that something was off.
Curiosity getting the better of her, she inquired, "Did you already know which gas canister was which from the start?"
Is that the reason he was able to accurately select the metal canister containing the pungent gas?
Lumian grinned and handed the metal canister to Jenna.
"Smell the cap for yourself."
Jenna eyed the canister suspiciously before cautiously sniffing the bottle.
A faint odor lingered, not particularly stimulating or potent, but still unpleasant.
"The other canister has no scent," Lumian added with a smile.
Jenna's flushed face turned an even deeper shade of red.
She felt foolish, having believed the words of the other party and willingly taken part in the so-called "experiment."
Any feelings of gratitude she had prepared were instantly quashed.
Ignoring Jenna's enraged state, Lumian pocketed the 8 verl d'or banknote and marked the metal canister with a scratch before stowing it away.
Though the man possessed the ability to sense the whereabouts of items that had once belonged to him, Lumian wasn't afraid of being tracked since the man was already dead.
As for the function of the liquid in the remaining metal canister, he planned to test it on rats, stray dogs, and other animals.
Having completed the necessary tasks, Lumian pointed at the pervert's lifeless body and instructed Jenna, "Take a good look at

him and commit his face to memory. We'll need to investigate who he is."
"He probably has accomplices."
"Alright." Jenna strode toward the corpse, earnestly engraving his face into her memory.
After observing for a while, the recent events flooded back into her mind, fueling her anger. She raised her right leg and ruthlessly kicked the pervert's groin.
Again and again, without restraint.
"Dogsh*t, pervert, damn your mother, damn your entire family!" Jenna vented her emotions to her heart's content.
Lumian winced, feeling a twinge of pain, as he lowered his head to clean up the remnants at the scene.
Once Jenna had calmed down, he approached her with a large grayish-white cloth bag. As he stuffed the corpse and clothes inside, he casually inquired, "How did he abduct you?"
Jenna smoothed her disheveled brownish-yellow hair and tied it back into a simple ponytail.
Gritting her teeth, she recounted, "I encountered him in an alley next to the Salle de Bal Brise. He claimed to be a fan of my singing and asked for an autograph. The paper he handed me was sprinkled with that odorless gas. As soon as I signed it, I sensed something was wrong and lost most of my strength.
"After that, he attacked me, restrained me, and brought the bottle to my nose. That's when I passed out."
Lumian couldn't help but mock, "Aren't you being too careless?"
Jenna didn't agree.
"I've seen him several times while singing. I was certain that he genuinely enjoyed listening to me. Otherwise, I wouldn't have given him the time of day.
"And, as an unknown singer, it's an honor to have someone ask for your autograph...
"Besides, the gas doesn't have any smell!"
How could anyone have guarded against this?
Lumian scoffed.
"That's not what I meant. It's obvious that the gas dissipates quickly on paper. It needs to be used within a short period of time to have a certain effect. In other words, that pervert has been tailing you for a while and has probably figured out your routines. Otherwise, he wouldn't have cornered you so accurately in an empty alley and tainted the paper with the gas ten to twenty seconds in advance.
"Didn't you notice despite being followed for so long?"
Jenna fell silent, at times clenching her teeth, at times frustrated.

Lumian shifted his gaze and chuckled.
It was understandable that she didn't notice. That guy could discern hormonal information from different individuals.
If it weren't for the fact that Monsieur Ive was clearly weaker than the pervert and probably hadn't mastered the power of lust, Lumian would have suspected that his identity as a "robber" had been exposed.
He resealed the grayish-white cloth bag and used it to further erase any traces at the scene. Observing this, Jenna lent him a hand.
She's quite skilled at dealing with evidence... Lumian glanced at Jenna and left the cave with the cloth bag slung over his back, harboring some suspicions.
Due to Jenna intentionally not mentioning her unusual behavior under the influence of the pervert, Lumian believed that this Showy Diva had some understanding of the Beyonder world, or she might even be one herself.
And her source of information or power most likely stemmed from "Red Boots" Franca from the Savoie Mob.
When Lumian arrived at his hiding spot, he ignited the carbide lamp and held it in his hand, glancing back at the depths of the path.
The path descended. There was darkness in the distance,
a void that swallowed everything as it lay in wait for its prey to approach.
"What are you looking at?" Jenna asked curiously.
She sensed that Ciel was acting mysterious.
Lumian ended his gaze and smiled.
"I'm wondering where we'll end up if we keep going down. Perhaps the Trier from the Fourth Epoch?"
In reality, what he was truly pondering was:
The abnormal ability displayed just now was strikingly similar to Monsieur Ive's. If the two of them were accomplices, would they instinctively choose a familiar place in the underground world for the crime? The same underground destination where Monsieur Ive had entered that night?
If that were the case, perhaps he would uncover something if he continued down this path.
Disappointed, Jenna remarked, "That's not a good place."
Lumian remained silent as he retraced his steps along the path. Lost in her own thoughts, Jenna followed silently, clutching the carbide lamp left behind by the pervert.
Just as he was about to reach the level that roughly replicated the layout aboveground, Lumian halted and said with a contemptuous

smile, "Do you need me to escort you to the surface?"
"You're not going back?" Jenna asked, surprised.
Lumian shrugged. "I need to find a suitable place to dispose of this corpse."
Jenna nodded and refrained from prying further. "I can ascend on my own. I've been underground before."
Does that imply you possess the means to protect yourself?
Lumian watched Jenna depart with light footsteps, inwardly sighing.
Does every human and dog in Trier have access to Beyonder powers?
Is something amiss with Trier, or is something amiss with me? Why do I always encounter such individuals?
Shaking his head, he hoisted the corpse onto his back. As he dealt with the footprints, he made his way toward the hidden quarry cave where he had previously sought the boon.
Along the way, he performed two instances of anti-tracking to ensure no one was tailing him.
Upon reaching the underground quarry cave, Lumian tossed aside the grayish-white cloth bag containing the corpse and arranged the altar.
Initially, he had intended to visit the nearest hospital morgue during the night to acquire fresh corpses, but now he had a better option!
After setting up the altar, lighting the candles, and constructing a wall of spirituality, Lumian retrieved the pre-drawn faux goatskin adorned with the corresponding symbol.
The central pattern on the paper consisted of a ring formed by thorns, encircled by symbols representing eyes, curves, and rivers.
Just tracing these patterns in Room 207 had drained Lumian's spirituality.
With the faux goatskin in place, Lumian took two steps back and gazed at the flickering candles, preparing for the subsequent incantation.
In this ritual, one couldn't employ the phrase "I! I summon in my name" to beseech oneself. Instead, they had to craft a three-line description of their being and feign the role of a creature from the spirit world.
It could be done in any manner, devoid of any wielding of authority, as long as it could pinpoint the location within the wall of spirituality.
Lumian parted his lips and muttered in Hermes, "Cordu Village's Trickster King, Aurore Lee's younger brother, an entity known as Lumian Lee..."

Chapter 163: Three Questions

The flame of the orange candle, representing the focal point of the prayer, flickered as though stirred by an unseen breeze. Apart from that, it remained unaffected, maintaining its ordinary hue without any hint of transformation.

Lumian sensed an unusual pulsation deep within his soul, as if a distant cry had reached his ethereal essence.

Temporarily unable to respond, he continued to recite the incantation.

"I implore you,

"I beseech to be bestowed the Prophetic Concoction..."

In this ritualistic spell, words like "help create" couldn't be used. It had to be "bestowed" or "gifted."

Lumian's spirit trembled with each uttered word, like ripples extending outward, leaving him with an unsettling sensation of both elevation and dizziness.

Taking two steps forward, he surveyed the aquatic monster's flesh, the lizard eyes, and the gray henbane. Retrieving the faux goatskin adorned with enigmatic symbols, he positioned it atop the orange candle's flame, symbolizing the target of his prayer.

Once the faux goatskin was ignited and placed within the natural hollow of the stone altar, Lumian meticulously gathered tulip powder and other ingredients, sprinkling them into the flames.

A peculiar fragrance swiftly permeated the ethereal barrier, causing Lumian to experience hallucinations.

He witnessed a profusion of mystical symbols adorning the faux goatskin, materializing in the void, in constant motion and reconfiguration, perpetually altering their collective form.

Lumian stepped back and scrutinized the diverse materials on the altar. In a resonant voice infused with Hermes' power, he invoked, "Tulip, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation!

"..."

As Lumian uttered the final word, his spirit's ripples merged, granting him the illusion that he could graze the candle's flame with a mere touch of his palm.

Simultaneously, a searing sensation ignited within his chest, accompanied by a faint hum resonating in his ears. His surroundings spun, akin to being tossed into the air and spun around repeatedly.

Guided by his spirituality, Lumian extended his right hand, pressing it toward the candle's flame.

His vision dimmed as his spirituality surged forth, intertwining

with the flames.
The candle's flame promptly expanded, casting a radiant and ethereal glow upon the entire altar.
The disparate ingredients of the Prophetic Concoction, once gathered, stirred and converged. Blood churned, and shadows undulated, crafting an exceptionally sinister tableau.
Struggling to maintain a steady flow of his spiritual essence, Lumian observed the physical components fade into specters, completing their reassembly.
A dark crimson phantom, infused with silver-black tincture, materialized before him, condensing into a murky liquid.
The liquid incessantly bubbled, each burst releasing sinuous tendrils of silver-black light, reminiscent of slithering serpents.
Lumian advanced two steps, seizing a metal canister from the altar. Unscrewing its lid, he positioned it beneath the liquid's surface.
The dark liquid swiftly coalesced, streaming into the canister, nearly filling it to the brim.
Having placed the vessel containing the Prophetic Concoction back on the altar, Lumian composed himself, preparing his mental state.
As Lumian calmed the ripples within his spirit, he recollected the entire process of the ritual.
If the thorn symbol hadn't reached a certain level of activation, elevating my status, I wouldn't have been able to respond and the endeavor would have failed... I can only perform two similar ritualistic spells consecutively... Lumian ruminated, gradually finding his thoughts settling.
Completing the five ritualistic spells required a minimum of Sequence 7, or even Contractee. Lumian, an Alms Monk of Sequence 8, could only accomplish it by relying on the corruption within his body.
Correspondingly, his spirituality couldn't endure for much longer.
After concluding the ritual and tidying the altar, Lumian dispelled the ethereal barrier and approached the grayish-white cloth bag to drag out the lifeless body.
With gentle care, he twisted the other party's head to its original position and opened the mouth.
Bathed in the glow of the blue carbide lamp, Lumian retrieved the Prophetic Concoction, unscrewed its lid, and poured the dark liquid into the corpse's mouth.
Rather than immediately permeating through the larynx, the liquid remained within, akin to a pool of water.
Suddenly, Lumian sensed the quarry's breeze turning colder, and

the carbide lamp's light deepened to a richer blue.
Almost simultaneously, he heard a rumbling sound, witnessing the corpse's throat writhe as it consumed all of the Prophetic Concoction.
In the next moment, the naked corpse sat upright, engulfed in an unnatural darkness that defied illumination.
His eyes snapped open upon his pallid, worn face. The once-brown irises had lost their color, now crystal-clear and devoid of hue.
Within the depths of those translucent eyes, layers of vibrant colors seemed to reside. A pure light hung high, countless nearly imperceptible figures, and flickering silver radiance...
Withstanding the bone-chilling cold, Lumian composed himself and inquired, "Where will Guillaume Bénet, the former padre from Cordu Village in Dariège, Riston Province, Intis Republic, appear in a month?"
During the interim, Lumian had contemplated the three questions he wished to pose.
Four primary rules governed the questioning:
First, it must pertain to the future. Inquiries regarding someone's whereabouts or past actions were forbidden.
Secondly, the description had to be precise enough, or an unanswered query would arise. The name Guillaume Bénet was commonplace in other parts of Intis. Numerous individuals shared the same name. Unless the village of origin was specified, the corpse might reveal the future fate of a different Guillaume Bénet.
Thirdly, regardless of the corpse's country of origin or familiarity with the corresponding language, it would respond in the same language as the question posed.
Lastly, a question could only contain one element requiring an answer. It could not be framed in the manner of "when and where will it be?"
The corpse's pale countenance took on a dark green tinge. It parted its lips and uttered in Intis, "Trier's Quartier de la Princesse Rouge."
The voice resonated with an illusory and ethereal quality, as if it emanated from another realm. It bore no resemblance to the deceased's living voice.
So, it can only be narrowed down to the Quartier de la Princesse Rouge? Lumian's brow furrowed slightly.
He could comprehend the reason behind it—this was not a Prophetic Concoction obtained from hidden entities. Its creator was essentially an Alms Monk, hence the effects naturally wouldn't be outstanding.
Lumian proceeded to raise his second question.
"Where will I encounter Louis Lund, the former butler of the village

administrator in Cordu Village, Dariège, Riston Province, Intis Republic?"
He refrained from mentioning Madame Pualis since he was uncertain of her connection to Madame Night. He feared that her elevated status might interfere with the prophecy's accuracy.
The corpse's eyes remained vacant and translucent as it gazed ahead. It responded with an ethereal voice, "Trier's Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman Avenue du Marché."
Avenue du Marché? It seems Louis Lund's presence there isn't mere happenstance... Lumian mused, a sense of satisfaction washing over him.
As he contemplated, he noticed the strange visions reflected in the corpse's transparent eyes gradually fading. Acting swiftly, he posed his third question.
"Where will Monsieur Ive, the proprietor of Auberge du Coq Doré in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, be from 11 p.m. to 12 p.m. this Sunday?"
Having observed Monsieur Ive previously entering the underground at this time, Lumian sought to ascertain the specifics of his destination.
Considering that Monsieur Ive had recently been "robbed" and had visited the police headquarters, he might refrain from venturing into the underground for the time being. Lumian specified the time as Sunday.
The corpse swiftly replied, "Trier's Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."
With that, the corpse thudded to the ground and closed its eyes once more, emanating the putrid stench of death.
Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons once again... Lumian bundled the corpse back into the cloth bag, intending to bury it even deeper underground.
...
In front of a beige three-story building, a stubbly-bearded tramp found himself cornered by two valets beside a pillar.
"I-I'll leave now," he stammered, trembling.
At that moment, a man dressed as a butler approached, his face filled with surprise.
"Master, is that you? Master!"
"What?" The tramp was perplexed.
The butler couldn't contain his excitement.
"Don't you remember? You're the owner of this place, and we are all your loyal servants. You suffered a head injury and lost many memories. One day, you suddenly ran away from home.
"It's been months. I've finally found you! You've returned!"

"I'm not, I'm not..." The tramp remembered his past clearly.
However, the butler and the two valets refused to listen to his explanation. They "encircled" him and led him into the building.
"Madam, Madam, the Master has returned!" the butler shouted with elation.
Before long, the tramp laid eyes upon an elegant and beautiful woman.
She wore a light-green dress, her eyes exuding a mature allure.
Overwhelmed with joy, she burst into tears and threw herself into the tramp's arms.
"You're back! You're finally back!"
As he inhaled the sweet scent of her perfume and felt the softness of her body against his, the tramp attempted to argue that he wasn't her husband, but the words caught in his throat.
In a daze of confusion, he was guided to the dining room. There, under a crystal chandelier, he beheld a sumptuous feast—a dozen oysters, a pot of succulent chicken, a plate of beef stewed with prunes, suet pudding, salad, and a bottle of White Elixir wine...
Simultaneously, the tramp's gaze fell upon the oil paintings adorning the walls of the dining room.
One of them was a portrait, strikingly similar to him.
Could it truly be me? But I recall every experience... *Could there be another who bears my resemblance?* The tramp grew even more bewildered.
After indulging in a hearty meal and savoring fine wines, he was led to the bedroom. Soon, the beautiful and elegant madam entered, dressed in a silk nightgown.
Her eyes shimmered with tears as she spoke, "Do you still remember my passion?"
The tramp's breathing quickened, and he couldn't resist taking a step forward.
The two of them embraced passionately, tumbling onto the bed, their desires overwhelming them.
In that moment, the tramp began to "believe" that he truly was the owner of this grand house. He had a beautiful wife, a professional butler, and a multitude of servants.
Even if the original master were to return, he would ensure that the other was exposed as a fraud!
...
Lumian resurfaced and entered Auberge du Coq Doré, carrying the extinguished carbide lamp.
Madame Fels, who manned the front desk, immediately stood up upon seeing him.
"Ciel—Monsieur Ciel, Baron Brignais wishes to meet you at the

Salle de Bal Brise after dinner."
Baron Brignais is seeking me? *What could it be about?* Lumian nodded.

Chapter 164: Intelligence

Salle de Bal Brise, the café on the second floor.

Lumian strolled over to Baron Brignais with an air of nonchalance and took a seat.

Not only did he lack any sense of deference or humility, but he also showed a blatant disregard for basic politeness, as if they were equals.

Louis, standing discreetly behind Baron Brignais, silently shook his head.

He had encountered many such individuals before, and their fate had always been the same—either handed over to the police by the Savoie Mob or gravely wounded in a violent gunfight, losing their capabilities in the process. They had no choice but to become subservient, like dogs wagging their tails, in exchange for the gang's protection. Some met their demise due to various reasons, their bodies cast into the dark recesses of the underground world or packed into wooden barrels filled with stones and thrown into the depths of the Srenzo River.

"Good evening, Baron," Lumian greeted with a disarming smile.

Baron Brignais betrayed no sign of anger on his face. He leisurely took a puff from his mahogany-colored pipe and casually inquired, "Where have you been this afternoon?"

"Underground," Lumian responded, resembling the corpse that had imbibed the Prophecy Concoction. He answered the other party's questions without any elaboration.

If "Little Minx" Jenna and "Red Boots" Franca concealed the fact that he had dispatched the pervert and saved the former, his response would have been a display of utmost candor.

Baron Brignais appeared momentarily taken aback but refrained from further probing. As he rubbed the mahogany pipe in his hand, he calmly stated, "I have a task for you."

Without waiting for Lumian to inquire, he explained with a smile, "I hold great expectations for you. I believe you can become a crucial member of our Savoie Mob, entrusted with significant matters.

"However, my favorable opinion alone is insufficient. You must demonstrate strength that surpasses most and make contributions that garner their recognition."

A carrot dangling before a donkey? Lumian scoffed inwardly.

Outwardly, he deliberately narrowed his eyes.

"And what might this be about?"

Baron Brignais set aside his mahogany pipe, took a sip of his coffee, and adopted a soothing tone as he spoke,

"Assault any prominent member of the Poison Spur Mob. It would be best if you inflict severe injuries. Killing them outright works too."
Lumian chuckled.
"Just two days ago, you cautioned me against causing a commotion and provoking an all-out conflict between the Poison Spur Mob and us.
"Aren't you concerned that such actions might transpire, ultimately leading to you becoming a target of the police headquarters?"
Although he had intended to lie in wait for the Poison Spur Mob's "Hammer" Ait, Lumian refused to be treated as a fool by Baron Brignais.
Baron Brignais nodded, pleased with Lumian's astuteness.
"You are far more intelligent than those who surround me.
"For the past two days, I've been closely observing the Poison Spur Mob's reactions, and it seems they have no immediate plans for revenge against you.
"What does that imply?"
"It means they're terrified of our Savoie Mob," Lumian replied with a jest.
It was, of course, a jest. If the Poison Spur Mob feared the Savoie Mob, they would never have grown to become the second-largest mob in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Baron Brignais shook his head.
"In the past, they would have undoubtedly retaliated, exacting a higher toll than just medical expenses from our Savoie Mob.
"Moreover, after Margot's demise, they merely put on a show on the surface. In reality, they took no actions that would attract the police's attention. It seemed they were searching for the true assassin amidst the chaos.
"These recurring anomalies lead me to believe that the Poison Spur Mob is preparing for something significant—something very, very important. That's why they remain patient and restrained.
"I can't be certain whether their forthcoming actions will impact our Savoie Mob, but we cannot idly wait for answers."
At least you're astute... Lumian grudgingly commended Baron Brignais within his thoughts.
With a smile, Lumian posed a question, "Are you suggesting that I eliminate their key members and observe their reactions?
"If they endure it without retaliation, it signifies a considerably grave problem. We would need to instigate a full-blown conflict and compel them to expose the issue, wouldn't we?"
Baron Brignais chuckled.

"I enjoy conversing with clever individuals.
"So, are you willing to undertake this task?"
Though his tone appeared inquisitive, his posture, gaze, and actions left no doubt that it was an order.
Should Lumian refuse, the Savoie Mob would withdraw its protection.
Lumian chuckled.
"I require information on all the significant members of the Poison Spur Mob—names, appearances, capabilities, distinguishing traits, and whether they have immediate family or spouses..."
Louis, who stood behind Baron Brignais, was taken aback.
Why is he asking about the family members of the Poison Spur Mob leaders? Is he planning to use them?
Among Trier's mobs, an unspoken rule prevailed—one that everyone abided by unless it was an exceptional circumstance: never target family members who weren't involved in the mob.
Most individuals had parents, spouses, and children. If they were to abandon all moral boundaries and kill without hesitation, none would be spared. Everyone would be in jeopardy.
Secondly, dealing with the families of low-ranking mobsters held no value. However, at Baron Brignais's level, his family remained confidential, known to only a select few. Furthermore, they resided outside Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Thirdly, those who held a certain status within the mob could be deemed ruthless. Threatening them with their families would only ignite their fury.
Fourthly, the annihilation of a family would inevitably make headlines, angering the higher-ups at the police headquarters and triggering a severe crackdown.
Thus, it was only in the process of eliminating a faction that they would confront the family of an enemy leader, avoiding the sowing of seeds of animosity and serving as a deterrent to other mobs.
What was Ciel's intention inquiring about the immediate family and wife of a crucial member of the Poison Spur Mob?
Baron Brignais gazed at Lumian for a few moments before a slow smile crept across his face.
"The boss of the Poison Spur Mob is Roger, known as Black Scorpion. He resides at 126 Avenue du Marché. I'm uncertain if he has a wife or immediate family. Even if he does, they aren't in the market district. They might not even be in Trier.
"He possesses sinister spells and magical powers. Even I wouldn't dare to confront him."
Baron Brignais seized the opportunity to caution Lumian about the

formidable strength of "Black Scorpion" Roger. It was wise to avoid any designs against him, for death would be the only outcome.
Sinister spells... A Beyonder focused on spellcasting? Considering Roger's ability to subdue Margot, he must be at least a Sequence 7. He might even possess a mystical artifact or Beyonder weapon... If Beyonders of this caliber lack robust bodies or special life-preserving abilities, they may resort to traps, close-range assassinations, and other methods. If their bodies aren't weak and they excel in close combat, or if they possess a substitution spell like Leah's paper figurine, I'll have hardly any chance of victory. Unless I employ the Luck Enhancement Spell to prearrange his misfortune and make him sufficiently unlucky... Lumian's thoughts raced like lightning, fleeting as they disappeared.
He nodded and inquired, "What about the others?"
Baron Brignais took a leisurely puff on his pipe before responding,"The Poison Spur Mob once had four powerful and significant members who were slightly inferior to us in the market district. However, after Margot's demise at your hands, his replacement, Wilson, is quite feeble. Their overall strength has greatly diminished.
"Roger's deputy, 'Baldy' Harman, is one of them. Initially, he and Roger arrived in the market district, establishing the Salle de Gristmill and gradually recruiting a group of individuals to form the Poison Spur Mob.
"He's highly skilled in combat, on par with Margot in that regard. Additionally, he possesses peculiar abilities. For instance, he can withstand a blade and only suffer minor injuries. At times, he exhibits sudden bursts of violence, as if under the influence of some drug. He can instill fear in others. Oh, and he wields a knife coated with poison.
"He's exceedingly cruel. He doesn't have a family or a mistress, but he takes a keen interest in women. He often dallies with street girls under the Poison Spur Mob.
"His usual residence is 'Black Scorpion' Roger's house. When he seeks the company of a woman, he opts for a relatively clean motel or hotel within the market district."
Lumian listened attentively, gradually formulating a plan.
There's a highly effective trap for 'Baldy' Harman.
Regardless of how Harman acquires such formidable defenses that only result in minor injuries after being slashed, it suggests a high probability that he's willing to trade injuries for victory. He relies heavily on his strengths in this aspect.
If that's the case, I can provide him an opportunity. However, Fallen Mercury will be the one to inflict those minor injuries upon

him.
Even minor wounds can bleed!
Baron Brignais continued, "Most of the dancers under the Poison Spur Mob are under the supervision of Castina from Feynapotter. She was abducted to Trier and later became 'Black Scorpion' Roger's mistress.
"'Short-legged Candlestick' was her nickname back when she worked as a dancer, owing to her relatively petite stature."
Lumian envisioned a compact candlestick and formed a rough image of Castina in his mind.
"Castina doesn't engage in frequent fights, but she exhibits remarkable combat skills when she does. She's cold and merciless when dealing with disobedient dancers. Perhaps she's forgotten the hardships she endured," Baron Brignais remarked with a touch of gentlemanly courtesy. "She resides in an apartment at 19 Rue du Rossignol. We're unsure of the specific floor or room she occupies. She often frequents Roger's house."
What right do you have to speak of her like that? Why don't we discuss the person who became a singer at Salle de Bal Brise after her father was forced to die due to a debt? Lumian never believed that mobsters possessed a true conscience.
No matter the camaraderie, loyalty, or care they exhibited toward their peers, they were merely wildflowers adorned with mud. They essentially sought out victims among the dancers, street girls, ordinary individuals persecuted by loan sharks, and the peddlers they extorted.
Brignais proceeded to introduce the final leader of the Poison Spur Mob.
"'Hammer' Ait was originally a member of our Savoie Mob. He possessed courage, intellect, and a sturdy physique. I held him in high regard and planned to recommend him to the boss. However, he betrayed us and joined the Poison Spur Mob. He swiftly acquired Beyonder powers.
"I suspect he consumed a potion from the Warrior pathway and has already reached Sequence 8. His towering height, nearly 1.9 meters, and his conduct during conflicts lead me to this deduction.
"'Hammer' describes his fists, which possess the hardness and force of iron hammers. He typically fights unarmed, but he's also adept with a revolver and a dirk.
"He resides at 25 Rue des Pavés, adjacent to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. There is a sizable contingent of Poison Spur Mob members in that area."
Pugilist? *Will Beyonder characteristics manifest upon his demise?*
Lumian nodded and queried Baron Brignais,

"I also require their approximate travel patterns. Additionally, provide me with a revolver, an ample supply of bullets, and a portable weapon. A dirk, dagger, bayonet, or axe will suffice."
"No problem. I'll have Louis deliver them to you tomorrow morning." Baron Brignais nodded with satisfaction.
After observing Ciel depart from the café, Louis lowered his voice and inquired, "Baron, are we truly going to let him confront the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob?"
Baron Brignais chuckled.
"Didn't you hear my explanation earlier? I didn't deceive him about this.
"However, the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob are not easily dealt with. Whether he struggles and requires our aid and protection afterward, or if he fails and finds himself on the brink of death, we can crush his arrogance and make him obedient."

Chapter 165: Meeting Jenna Again

Louis exclaimed in surprise, "What if Ciel fails and gets done in by the Poison Spur Mob?"

Baron Brignais chuckled and replied, "When has our Savoie Mob ever kept all its members?"

...

On the way back to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian found himself in quite a good mood.

Initially, he had intended to apprehend a significant member of the Poison Spur Mob, probing into their source of power and their affiliation with the wicked deity Madame Pualis worshiped. But now, the Savoie Mob had assigned him a similar task. It aligned perfectly with his desires.

This way, he not only swiftly gained detailed information about multiple targets, saving valuable time, but he could also fully utilize the Savoie Mob's resources, such as weaponry, manpower, and connections.

A moment ago, Lumian contemplated requesting explosives from Baron Brignais, mulling over the possibility of setting a trap to blow up one of the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob.

In the end, he decided against it. Firstly, he felt it was too brazen and would attract unwanted attention from the police. Secondly, being a wanted criminal, he couldn't afford to be investigated. Thirdly, if he obliterated his target entirely, how could he gather any information?

Of course, he could employ the Summoning Dance and the wall of spirituality to allow the deceased spirit to cling to him and enhance the memories that left the deepest imprints. However, this method was entirely unpredictable. Who knew if those individuals' minds would be as deranged as the previous pervert's? Moreover, each Summoning Dance could only amplify a single memory. If luck wasn't on his side, it could take a significant amount of time to find useful information. This contradicted his intention of swiftly departing from the scene of the assassination.

Initially, Lumian planned to deal with "Hammer" Ait, but upon hearing Baron Brignais's description, he considered "Baldy" Harman as a viable candidate as well.

Compared to Ait, Harman had notable "weaknesses" that Hunters could exploit to set traps!

His power granted him exceptional body resilience. On numerous occasions, he sustained only minor injuries despite being slashed with knives.

Lumian recalled Aurore's words: "Those skilled in swimming are

prone to drowning."
In Harman's case, one could interpret it as, "Those adept at blocking weapons with their bodies are more susceptible to perishing by weapons." As for Lumian, he possessed Fallen Mercury, the Cursed Blade.
Furthermore, in comparison to "Hammer" Ait, who frequently traveled with a large entourage and resided within the Poison Spur Mob's settlement, "Baldy" Harman ventured out alone occasionally, seeking street girls and dancers. Consequently, he proved to be a simpler target for assassination. Moreover, he was closer to the core power of the Poison Spur Mob and held more secrets.
However, the conundrum arose. If Lumian were to set a trap and employ Fallen Mercury to deal with "Baldy" Harman, capturing him alive and extracting information would be impossible.
If Lumian could overpower "Baldy" Harman after stabbing him and dragging him to a secluded corner in Underground Trier, why bother stabbing him initially?
If he couldn't, his only recourse would be to stab the enemy and allow him to flee. Alternatively, after his escape, Lumian could await the intervention of the Montsouris ghost to "assist" in the target's demise.
Whether this would implicate the target's family wasn't his concern.
Hence, the pursuit of "Baldy" Harman and "Hammer" Ait presented their respective pros and cons. Lumian was not yet able to reach a decision.
He intended to contemplate his target selection after receiving more detailed information, weapons, and ammunition from Baron Brignais the following morning.
Upon entering Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian immediately spotted Ruhr and Michel, the short, gray-haired couple. They were clad in tattered, foul-smelling garments, laboriously hauling a large swollen bag made of flaxen-colored cloth up the stairs.
"What's all this?" Lumian inquired curiously as he traversed the lobby.
Weren't these the same elderly folks peddling counterfeit street maîtresse d'atelier photos at Suhit steam locomotive station? *Why were they bringing back such a sizable bag?*
Ruhr ceased pulling at the cloth bag, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He forced a smile and replied, "Don't you know, Monsieur Ciel? We moonlight as scavengers by night. We salvage discarded items that might still hold value."
Informed by Charlie's "," the couple was aware of Ciel's newfound leadership role in the Savoie Mob. Consequently, they saw no issue

with Ciel seeking answers from them since Auberge du Coq Doré was his turf.
From their perspective, as the guardian of Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ciel needed to stay informed about the establishment to prevent any mishaps.
Juggling two occupations, one of which involves deception... It certainly reeks of all sorts of rubbish... Lumian pinched his nose and silently muttered. He pondered and asked thoughtfully, "Do you hoard all this trash in your room?"
Ruhr wore an ingratiating smile and confirmed, "Indeed. We visit the waste disposal site every few days. People drop off various items there. Heh heh, while scavengers are filthy, without us, Trier would be overwhelmed by foul odors. Every nook and cranny would be brimming with refuse."
In Trier, scavengers served as supplementary cleaners.
No wonder there's a stench in the room. No wonder you perpetually reek and forgo bathing... As Lumian ascended the stairs at a leisurely pace, he stole a glance at the wrinkled faces and slightly stooped postures of Ruhr and Michel. He casually inquired, "You're not young anymore. *Why do you still toil so diligently for money?*"
Ruhr and Michel were taken aback, their smiles faltering subtly.
After a brief pause, Ruhr mustered a pained and helpless smile.
"It is precisely because we are old that we must labor so strenuously.
"We arrived in Trier when we were very young and took up various occupations. We had a child, but he did not survive to adulthood. The monthly wages we received merely sustained our survival. As our health began to decline and our strength waned, fear gripped us. We were uncertain of what the future held.
"What if we grow too old to engage in our usual work someday? What would we do? Deplete our meager savings within a few months and rely on the charitable acts of the Church and the government to eke out a meager existence until we perish from hunger?
"I-I do not wish for such a fate..."
Lumian was suddenly reminded of something his sister had once uttered. "Intis is exceedingly harsh now. There is no protection for hardworking individuals in their twilight years."
Stirred by his thoughts, Ruhr continued, "Thankfully, our appetites have diminished with age. We don't eat or sleep much. That leaves us with more time to earn money. We don't have to worry about anything else. We can save most of what we earn.
"In the coming years, we should be able to enjoy a few more good

ones by relying on our savings...
"Heh heh, truth be told, compared to most people, we're considered fortunate. None of them made it to our age."
Madame Michel, standing beside him, wore a wistful expression.
"Once we've saved enough, we'll return to Aurmir and purchase a plot of land to cultivate grapes. Even if we lack the strength in the future, we can hire assistance. We don't have extravagant expenses anyway."
Aurmir stood as the provincial capital of Champagne Province, renowned as the foremost hub of wine production in the Northern Continent.
Silently, Lumian nodded as he observed the elderly couple laboriously hauling the bag of trash upstairs.
After a brief respite, he put on simple makeup and changed his attire. Clad in a linen shirt, brown overalls, loafers, and a dark bowler hat, he made his way straight to Salle de Gristmill.
Since "Hammer" Ait remained one of his targets, he needed to personally observe him.
It was the late hours of the night, and Salle de Gristmill buzzed with activity. Amid the pulsating music, men and women gyrated on the dance floor, releasing their frustrations.
Concerned about being recognized by the Poison Spur Mob, Lumian approached the bar and ordered a glass of rye beer before making his way to the dance floor. As he swayed to the rhythm, he surveyed his surroundings.
Before long, he spotted "Little Minx" Jenna appearing on the raised wooden platform in front of him.
She wore a similar outfit to the one she had donned in the afternoon, a short white blouse and a flouncy skirt, showcasing her fair chest.
This time, she sported a mole on the bridge of her nose.
It signified audacity.
Impressive mental strength she possesses. Despite the afternoon's events, she's back at work in the evening... Lumian couldn't help but marvel.
In his opinion, since Jenna was "Red Boots" Franca's lover, there was no need for her to be so committed.
The rhythmic drumbeats halted, and all eyes on the dance floor turned to Jenna, panting.
Jenna began with a high-pitched tone.
"Ernest, stay away from my wife and pipe!"
Laughter erupted from the crowd as if a collective realization had struck them.
In sync with the cheerful and bawdy singing, they swayed their

bodies gently.
As Jenna sang, she executed high kicks, shifting her position and winking at the audience from different angles, even performing an exaggerated split.
During this display, her gaze briefly crossed paths with Lumian. She appeared momentarily stunned before returning to her normal demeanor.
Once she finished her song, the intense drumbeats resumed. Jenna wasted no time resting. She leaped onto the dance floor, navigating through the sudden eruption of cheers, whistles, and men vying for proximity. She approached Lumian and shouted with a playful smile, "Handsome lion, dance!"
In Intis, the lion was often used to describe alluring men due to their radiant mane, akin to the sun.
Lumian sensed that Jenna had something important to share. He set aside his beer and joined her on the dance floor, engaging in a lively dance with the Showy Diva, face-to-face.
Just as they were about to embrace, Jenna threw herself into Lumian's arms and whispered into his ear, "You're quite the talented dancer. By the way, I've discovered the identity of that pervert. His name is Hedsey. He used to reside in Room 504 at Auberge du Coq Doré."
Charlie's room? The occupant of Room 504 who put up Susanna Mattise's portrait? Lumian was taken aback.

Chapter 166: In Return

Lumian had always believed that the tenant, like Charlie, had been enchanted by Susanna Mattise in his dreams. His vitality had been gradually drained, until he met a sudden demise in the room. Monsieur Ive, the hotel owner, had secretly transported the lifeless body to a secluded spot in Underground Trier. Little did he expect that the tenant would transform into a pervert with Beyonder powers. He now roamed Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, preying on attractive women.

Lumian was convinced that Hedsey's newfound abilities stemmed from a boon granted due to the absence of Beyonder characteristics after death. It was clear that these powers originated from the same source as Susanna Mattise and Monsieur Ive.

In essence, not long after Susanna Mattise's portrait was plastered, something extraordinary had occurred to Hedsey. He had become a devout follower of the Mother Tree of Desire and received two to three boons within a few short months. As a result, he had gained significant strength and mastery over various mystical techniques. For Beyonders who progressed by consuming potions, such speed was unimaginable, unless they possessed profound understanding and were at a remarkably low level.

However, Hedsey's boons also came with a downside. The recipient would be influenced by the power and gradually deviate from their true self. In certain aspects, they would become increasingly extreme, often engaging in actions that seemed irrational to ordinary individuals and inviting disaster upon themselves.

Both Monsieur Ive's miserliness and Hedsey's insatiable lust for women fell into this category.

Lumian suspected that nearly all boons had similar repercussions to some extent. Over time, they would inexorably draw the recipient closer to the bestower and induce corresponding mutations.

The reason Lumian remained unaffected by the powers of the Dancer and Alms Monk was that they didn't directly come from the hidden entity known as Inevitability, but rather the corruption within his body that had been filtered through the seal. Additionally, Lumian had always maintained a vigilant stance in such matters. He not only refrained from altering his style and way of life to exploit the traits of the Dancer and Alms Monk for greater control over his strength but at times even went against their influence.

Furthermore, Lumian would advance in Sequence and have a

preliminarily digestion before obtaining the corresponding boon. He sought to preserve the balance of power within his body.
Lowering his head, Lumian whispered to Jenna in a hushed voice, "How did you discover this?"
As Jenna swayed to the rhythm, she pursed her lips and replied, "It's quite evident that the pervert cannot exist without women. Kidnapping a woman every day and dragging her underground simply isn't feasible, or else he would have been apprehended long ago. Damn it, there must have been several victims. Do those incompetent black-skinned dogs even notice?
"Then how does he usually solve his problem? Clearly, relying on himself isn't sufficient to satiate his desires. So, I enlisted Franca's help and inquired with the dancers and street girls from the Savoie Mob. I swiftly obtained an answer."
"How can that pervert, who deserves to be f*cked by a donkey, possess such virility? He can perform multiple times a day!"
"Why doesn't he pursue those wealthy old ladies? Both parties would be satisfied!"
Jenna recounted her investigation with a sense of pride, showcasing her intellect.
Throughout the afternoon, she had been brooding over Lumian's earlier prank, which had made her appear foolish.
Before embracing the beliefs of the Mother Tree of Desire and receiving the boon, Hedsey was a regular visitor to Rue de la Muraille, Rue de Breda, and Rue du Rossignol. However, after obtaining the boon, his mind became consumed with thoughts of women... Lumian couldn't help but acknowledge that Jenna occasionally demonstrated some intelligence.
With that in mind, Lumian decided to share some information.
"That abnormal desire must be a result of his Beyonder powers' influence."
"Beyonder powers..." Jenna glanced up at Lumian.
She had expected him to feign ignorance, just as they did in Underground Trier, where neither side openly acknowledged Hedsey's displayed Beyonder powers. To her surprise, he spoke candidly.
After a brief pause, Jenna, who was dancing closely with Lumian, whispered in confusion, "Why do Beyonder powers make him so perverse?"
This was unlike the Beyonder powers she was familiar with, which at most had a slight effect before losing control.
Lumian smirked once again. "It's an abnormal Beyonder power."
"Do you think I can't tell that it's abnormal?" Jenna grew infuriated once more.

Lumian chuckled.
"As for why it's abnormal, go back and ask Franca. If Franca doesn't know either, have her inquire with the Boss."
He shared this information with Jenna because he was concerned that there might be more to the issues surrounding Monsieur Ive, Susanna Mattise, Hedsey, and the others.
If the official Beyonders failed to uncover the truth, his only hope lay with Mr. K's finger and the Beyonders associated with the Savoie Mob.
Jenna snorted and dropped the matter. She refocused on dancing with Lumian.
As the music neared its end, she suddenly reached out and touched Lumian's chest.
"Haha, nice bod!" Jenna grinned, then retreated, heading towards the half-height wooden platform in front of the dance floor.
It seemed as though she had finally exacted her revenge for what had transpired underground. She was filled with elation.
Lumian scoffed and left the dance floor, once again picking up his glass of rye beer.
As he listened to the music, he swayed his body gently, all the while observing the situation within Salle de Gristmill.
As Lumian surveyed the area, his attention was drawn to a group of mobsters congregating near the stage. They wore a mishmash of outfits, surrounding a towering man who stood at a staggering height of nearly 1.9 meters.
The burly man bore a striking resemblance to "Giant" Simon. His black shirt and formal attire emphasized his bulging muscles, but the dark-blue canvas pants and strapless black leather boots seemed out of place, creating a peculiar ensemble.
With his tousled brown hair and slightly set-apart brown eyes, his ordinary facial features were complemented by a chiseled jawline. His hands and legs were longer than those of an average person.
"Hammer" Ait... Lumian averted his gaze, suspecting that this man was one of his targets.
In Trier, there weren't many individuals towering at nearly 1.9 meters.
Lumian wasn't concerned about "Hammer" Ait and his subordinates recognizing him from this distance. The ballroom was dimly lit, with only the soft glow of gas wall lamps and a chandelier above, providing enough illumination for dancing and discreet conversations. Unless someone was intimately familiar with Lumian or had just seen him, they wouldn't be able to identify him.
Furthermore, Lumian had taken precautions to disguise himself.

He hadn't anticipated Jenna recognizing him at first glance either.
After Jenna finished singing another song, "Hammer" Ait led his subordinates off the dance floor and ascended to the second floor.
Lumian continued his observations when he suddenly spotted a familiar figure entering the room.
It was Monsieur Ive, the proprietor of Auberge du Coq Doré, his attire slightly faded from washing.
His anxious and worried expression was evident as his blue eyes scanned the surroundings.
Is he searching for Hedsey? The pervert didn't return after leaving in the afternoon. They suspect something happened to him, so they're scouring the dance halls, seeking clues with the street girls? Lumian withdrew his gaze thoughtfully and shifted his attention back to the dancers on the floor.
Based on the characteristics exhibited by Hedsey's Spirit Body, Lumian sensed that Monsieur Ive was much weaker in comparison. He likely possessed the power of a Sequence 9 boon, focused on greed, possibly with elements of appetite.
As for Hedsey, he was likely on the level of Sequence 8, with a slim chance of being a Sequence 7. Lumian leaned more towards the former, as the few Sequence 7 individuals he had encountered before were formidable adversaries, difficult to overcome even with preparations and traps.
Of course, had Lumian not carefully observed and realized that Hedsey had the ability to trigger others' desires, he might have been swiftly dealt with.
In that environment, without Jenna's presence, Lumian would have relied on his own strength to resist the influence and not completely forget the existence of the enemy. With Showy Diva, it was challenging for him to restrain himself. He had to rely on pain to awaken his senses.
From the corner of his eye, Lumian observed Monsieur Ive engaging in conversation with the part-time street girl dancers. The way they scolded him, wearing expressions of disdain, struck Lumian as amusing.
Is he pretending to negotiate a price in order to gather information about Hedsey's whereabouts?
In the end, he's just too stingy, always bargaining down the other party's offer by half or more, resulting in their scolding?
Heh heh, Charlie was worried that Monsieur Ive, an old widower, wouldn't be willing to spend money on a licensed prostitute and risk contracting a disease. It seems he's overthinking it. Monsieur Ive can't even bring himself to spend money on an unlicensed street girl!

The negative effects of a boon are truly potent...
Hmm, if there are women in that group who possess the same boons as Hedsey and are on the same level, they should be in a constant state of hunger and thirst. Monsieur Ive wouldn't need to seek out another street girl. Heh heh, he would only end up despising himself for being a man. He would be on the verge of being drained dry, with his desires forcibly aroused.
The best disguises for those women would be dancers and street girls?
Something doesn't add up. If there really were such women, Hedsey wouldn't need to come out and harm others... Could it be that everyone at this level has advanced or died, with no replacements? Or is there an imbalance in the number of men and women? *Is Hedsey the one being ostracized?*
As Lumian contemplated these thoughts, the band struck up another lively dance tune.
After finishing her song, Jenna leaped off the half-height wooden stage once again and approached Lumian, inviting him to dance.
This elicited boos from the surrounding crowd.
Knowing that Jenna had something else to say, Lumian deliberately maneuvered to provoke those who were jeering.
He stepped onto the dance floor, drew closer to Jenna, and began swaying his hips.
Jenna looked up at him, smiling, and asked, "What brings a Savoie mobster like you to the Salle de Gristmill?"
Lumian clicked his tongue and chuckled.
"Don't you think I'm fond of you? Of course, I'm here to listen to your singing."
Jenna scoffed.
"Your target is 'Hammer' Ait, isn't it? You want to repeat what happened with Margot?"
"You're quite clever," Lumian praised in a taunting tone.
Jenna smirked confidently. "I can assist you and provide important information."
Lumian suppressed his nonchalance and asked thoughtfully, "What do you desire in return?"
Jenna snorted and cursed, "Are you f*cking underestimating me?
"Although I didn't thank you this afternoon, I won't forget that you saved me. Coincidentally, I'm familiar with all the dance halls in the market district. Moreover, I just had a chat with Ait about some matters after the performance. I should be able to help you."
Without waiting for Lumian's response, she gritted her teeth and continued, "'Hammer' resides in the innermost room on the second floor, towards Auberge du Coq Doré. He has ten thugs by his side.

Four stationed at the door—two inside and two outside. Two by the window, two near the sofa, and two always behind him. They're all armed.

"The security wasn't this tight before, and there weren't as many people. It's all because of what you did to Margot.

"That room has an attached washroom. It's currently unoccupied. If the window is fully opened, it can just about accommodate a person.

"From the ventilation pipe in the ballroom kitchen, you can climb up to the second floor and bypass the guards stationed at the stairs. Then, enter the adjacent room and leap from the windowsill onto a narrow ledge outside the washroom. It requires considerable skill to pull off successfully."

Chapter 167: Convergence

Upon hearing Jenna's account, Lumian instinctively twirled and spun, his surprise evident as he asked, "How do you know all this?"
It made sense that Jenna would have a basic understanding of the room layout and the thugs' positions after venturing to the second-floor room and conferring with "Hammer" Ait. However, how did she know about the ventilation pipe in the ballroom kitchen leading to the second floor? Or jumping from the neighboring windowsill to the washroom? And what about the ledge on the outer wall of that specific room? Were these details within the grasp of an underground singer, known for her bawdy songs and exaggerated performances?
She shouldn't possess such knowledge!
Jenna, her face adorned with black eye shadow and a fake mole, sported a smug expression.
"Don't fret about how I know. I avoid seeing what I shouldn't, hearing what I shouldn't, and asking questions I shouldn't," she retorted, cleverly turning Lumian's words back on him.
This brought her considerable satisfaction.
Only those planning an assassination or devising an escape in dire circumstances would pay attention to such particulars and observe with a purpose... Which category does Jenna fall into? Her powers of observation in this environment are nearly on par with a Hunter's. Sequences leaning toward assassination required gathering environmental information. Assassination... Lumian's mind raced, concocting a plan to bluff Jenna.
Grinning mischievously, he uttered, "So you're an Assassin."
He stressed the word "Assassin."
Jenna's expression changed, her smile freezing.
"How did you figure it out?" she blurted out, shocked.
"By using my brain," Lumian replied, his smile unwavering.
There were still a few Sequences that excelled at environmental observation. Lumian had taken a bold guess, considering Jenna as an Assassin. He recalled Ryan and his companions mentioning that Demoness was a relatively common pathway in the central and northern regions of Intis, especially Trier. In any case, he had nothing to lose if he was wrong.
Meanwhile, Lumian pondered to himself, Not long after arriving in Trier, I encountered an Assassin and came to her aid. Can this be seen as a manifestation of the convergence of Beyonder characteristics?
Jenna can't have reached Sequence 7; she isn't a Witch. Otherwise, even if weakened by the sedative on the paper, she could have

effortlessly overpowered Hedsey with her mystical abilities. The term Witch clearly indicates proficiency in spells and curses, as Aurore's notebook had mentioned.
She is unlikely to be a Sequence 8 Instigator. *How could an Instigator be fooled by me repeatedly?*
But it isn't out of the question. Perhaps Jenna had been more foolish in the past and relied on the Instigator path to enhance her intelligence? Furthermore, her willingness to provide information on "Hammer" Ait could be interpreted as a form of instigation.
Heh heh, Jenna is a woman, so there's no need to worry about her gender changing after consuming the Witch potion.
Where had Jenna obtained the potion? Had Franca given it to her? Could Franca also be a Beyonder following the Demoness pathway?
If Franca is only a Sequence 8, that would be fine. But what if she were a Sequence 7 Witch? Who knows if Franca had been male or female before? Well, her behavior towards women is certainly peculiar. She is in a romantic relationship with Jenna. Hmm...
Jenna quietly contemplated her recent words, but she didn't uncover any information that might have revealed her own Sequence.
She decided not to dwell on what she couldn't figure out. She kindly reminded Lumian, "If you plan to confront 'Hammer' Ait in the washroom, you must think it through. According to what I heard from Franca, Ait is a Pugilist. He excels in close combat more than any other Sequence. Relying solely on your Beyonder abilities to target him won't be as effective due to his physical prowess.
"Although you can fight, I believe there's a high chance you'll be killed on the spot if you engage him in a place like the washroom, which isn't spacious enough."
"Madame, are you persuading me or taunting me? It seems you still possess some potential as an Instigator," Lumian candidly voiced his thoughts, not holding back his criticisms.
He realized that Franca knew "Hammer" Ait better than Baron Brignais. She had mentioned a crucial point that the latter had omitted.
Setting aside the possibility that Franca had a personal grudge against "Hammer" Ait, Franca either had a formidable background or had earned the trust of the boss of the Savoie Mob, gaining access to more mysticism knowledge and Sequence information than Baron Brignais.
Jenna was taken aback. "You know about Instigators?"
Is this still a country bumpkin from the countryside? How does he possess such extensive knowledge about the Beyonder pathways?
Franca had mentioned that he's wanted by the authorities. It

seemed he had been involved in a Beyonder incident?
"I know more than you think," Lumian replied, smiling.
As he spoke, he suddenly recalled a title that had recently belonged to him: "Mysticism Illiterate."
Lumian swiftly pushed aside his melancholy and earnestly considered Jenna's warning.
Indeed, while Hunters were also skilled in combat and killing as Sequences, if traps and abilities like Provocation were excluded, they still couldn't match the prowess of Pugilists in close combat. Especially in a confined and cramped environment, they couldn't employ their combat intelligence effectively. It would be difficult for them to achieve the feat of the weak defeating the strong.
Taking into account the modifications to his Dancer abilities and the utilization of various unorthodox tactics, Lumian felt he could just about hold his ground. He wouldn't fail immediately. If he wanted to eliminate "Hammer" Ait, he could only rely on Fallen Mercury and escape after a successful strike.
But what set this apart from killing "Baldy" Harman? There was no need to factor in the presence of ten thugs and ten revolvers.
Lumian assessed his possessions to see if anything could be useful in such a battle.
Over 1,700 verl d'or... Fallen Mercury... Blood from the aquatic monster... Poisonous scales from the aquatic monster... A vial of the sedative that rendered Jenna powerless... A bottle of stimulating gas to counteract the effects of the sedative... A bottle of liquid with unknown properties... A dagger left behind by that pervert... A ritual silver dagger... Several white bandages...
As he contemplated, a plan gradually took shape.
As he swayed to the rhythm, he cast a sidelong glance at Jenna and posed his question.
"Is that washroom spacious?"
Jenna made confirmation. "No, it's not. Besides the bathtub, toilet, and sink, it can only accommodate four to five people."
In other words, if Lumian and "Hammer" Ait engaged in close combat, there wouldn't be room for anyone else.
"Is there a curtain outside the bathtub?" Lumian inquired further.
"Yes," Jenna pondered for a moment. "Do you have a gun with you? I believe it would be better to use a gun. It's safer and gives you a higher chance of success."
"I don't," Lumian replied, shaking his head.
Jenna sneered, "You intend to carry out the plan tonight with just that?"
She paused briefly before continuing, "If you truly wish to kill 'Hammer' Ait tonight, I can lend you my revolver."

"You still have a revolver on you?" Lumian was surprised this time. He hadn't suspected that Jenna had a concealed revolver.
The Showy Diva wore a short white blouse with a wide collar that allowed her bra to peek out. Her beige fluffy short skirt and black boots that didn't reach her knees added to her attire. Moreover, she kept raising her legs as she danced. It seemed impossible for her to have a gun holster strapped to her inner thigh.
Lumian speculated that the only possible place for her to hide the revolver was within her pair of boots.
Jenna assumed Ciel was questioning why she carried a revolver, so she responded with a disdainful sigh.
"I perform in dance halls in places like the market district. Do you think all those monsters are upstanding citizens? Do you think they won't act impulsively and try something on me? Those pieces of filth have twisted minds all day. When their thoughts are controlled by their desires, they won't consider that I have a connection with Franca and a good relationship with her. Damn it, if deterrence always worked, there wouldn't be so many criminals!"
While speaking, Jenna followed the rhythm of the drums and crouched down, searching inside her boots.
Swiftly standing up, she pressed herself against Lumian. Twisting her body, she slipped her hand into his naturally lowered and swaying palm.
Lumian immediately felt the cold metal texture and the solid wood.
Without missing a beat, Lumian withdrew his hand and discreetly tucked the gun into his pocket.
Afterward, Jenna continued, "I bought it with most of my savings when I first arrived in the market district, before meeting Franca. That blasted black market merchant even tried to bed me, but I kicked his shin, making him scream in pain."
Carrying a gun for self-defense at all times... You're quite vigilant. Otherwise, those mobsters could have controlled you before meeting Franca. You might have even become a part-time dancer or a street girl... Lumian replied with a smile, "Well done!"
As the accompanying music reached its end, Jenna fell silent.
With the drumbeats fading away, Lumian observed Jenna as she walked toward the stage. He left the dance floor and returned to the outer circle.
Taking advantage of the opportunity to visit the washroom, he carefully examined and familiarized himself with the revolver Jenna had given him.
It was a compact revolver with a short barrel, ideal for concealed

carry.
Its color was a dark iron-black, and the grip was crafted from walnut wood. It held a total of six bullets.
After tinkering with the revolver for a while, Lumian realized a predicament.
His shooting experience was lacking. Previously, he had primarily relied on the shotgun's wide spray of pellets.
Oh well. I don't expect to kill Hammer Ait with a single shot. Injuring and weakening him will suffice. At such close range, with my grip and some shooting experience, I can't miss by much...
In an environment like the washroom, there's only one opportunity for a shot. "Hammer" Ait won't provide me with a chance for a second shot... Lumian swiftly made up his mind.
Exiting the washroom, he headed toward the kitchen of the Salle de Gristmill, taking advantage of the absence of people in the vicinity.

Chapter 168: Prayer Target

As Lumian made his way, his nimbleness served him well in evading servers bustling with trays of food and busboys returning used utensils.

He pressed forward until he reached the kitchen, only to find it in complete disarray.

Stacks of unwashed utensils lay haphazardly in the sink, coated in layers of greasy oil. Two dishwashing maids stood by, tirelessly scrubbing away at the never-ending pile of dishes.

The stoves emitted fierce yellow flames, turning the small space into a sweltering inferno. Sweat poured down everyone's faces as they toiled away.

Three chefs, adorned in white aprons, each prepared their own dishes. They would occasionally taste their concoctions by dipping their fingers in the sauces or sampling a morsel, wiping their hands casually on their aprons before moving on to the next dish.

Once the chefs approved, the servers would whisk the plates away, oblivious to the fact that their thumbs often grazed the food and thick soups. They paid no mind to it whatsoever.

The kitchen helpers scurried around the chefs, chopping vegetables, handling fish, tidying up ingredients, taking out the trash, and fetching various seasonings and supplies. They never ceased their efforts, yet the kitchen remained in disarray. Vegetable leaves, fish scales, and fruit peels were strewn about, oily and scattered across the floor, near the stoves, and close to the sink.

The clamor of the chefs and kitchen helpers filled the air with shouts and curses, creating a chaotic symphony.

Lumian could easily mistake it for a battlefield if he closed his eyes and listened closely.

Taking advantage of the chaotic scene, Lumian deftly navigated through the busy crowd and reached the cabinet brimming with ingredients. Using partitions, handles, and the grayish-white gas and water pipes, he skillfully ascended to the ceiling and slipped into the ventilation shaft.

The overpowering smell of oil and smoke assailed Lumian's senses, nearly overwhelming him.

But with the tolerance of an Alms Monk toward extreme environments, he pushed himself forward, crawling through the ventilation shaft and occasionally climbing higher.

After about ten seconds, he poked his head out from above a second-floor washroom.

Ensuring the coast was clear, Lumian agilely leaped down and

swiftly made his way to the door, carefully scanning both ends of the corridor in secrecy.
The area was eerily silent, with only two henchmen guarding the stairs, their focus solely on the first floor. They paid no mind to what lay behind them.
Relieved, Lumian let out a sigh and pinpointed his target. Crouching down, he leaped to the adjacent room.
Although the door was locked, Lumian encountered no obstacle he couldn't overcome. Utilizing a half-broken wire he had brought along, he managed to pry open the wooden door after a few attempts.
Just as Jenna had described, the washroom attached to "Hammer" Ait's room lacked a protruding window sill. It only had a decorative ledge, barely providing enough space to stand on its side.
Even for a Hunter, leaping from the window sill to the narrow ledge posed a significant challenge, demanding perfect balance.
Fortunately, Lumian possessed the extraordinary flexibility of a Dancer, almost surpassing human limits.
After careful observation, he jumped up and landed precisely on the ledge with his right foot. His left side wavered, threatening to tip him over.
In a crucial moment, Lumian's body quivered like a coiled spring, propelling him back toward the washroom. He swiftly grasped the window frame with his right hand, regaining stability.
Squatting down, he revealed only half of his head, peering silently into the room.
The washroom door stood ajar, and occasional mobsters passed by. Lumian exercised patience, studying their movements until he discerned a pattern. Seizing the opportune gap when the washroom door was momentarily unattended, he skillfully pried open the window using Hedsey's dagger and clambered inside.
Maintaining composure and confidence, he swiftly closed the glass window before hurrying to the space beneath the bathtub, concealing himself with the undrawn curtains.
Lumian, having successfully infiltrated the premises, arranged his few essential items in easily accessible positions. He took a moment to double-check their locations, ensuring he wouldn't fumble in a state of panic.
Standing there motionless, he strained his ears to catch the activities in the adjacent room.
"Hammer" Ait occasionally inquired about their recent earnings to the dance hall manager, scolded his subordinates with anger, or engaged in flirtatious exchanges with the star dancer, accompanied by seemingly intimate gestures.

After a while, when the dance hall manager and the star dancer departed, Ait seemed to rise from his seat and began pacing slowly.
He addressed the mobsters in the room, saying, "In the following days, send out all your boys and have them 'visit' every individual within our territory. I want you to ensure that we know who can be elected as the market district's member of parliament in next week's election!"
Oh, so your mob is meddling in the parliamentary elections? Lumian felt a mixture of surprise and lack thereof.
The growth of Trier's mobs was impossible without some form of backing. They either maintained favorable relations with the police department and influential figures within it, enjoyed protection from powerful political figures, or acted as the black-gloved enforcers for influential merchants. The latter undoubtedly had connections to high-ranking government officials, upper echelons of the Churches, and military generals.
Lumian had never anticipated that the mastermind behind the Poison Spur Mob possessed the audacity to vie for a parliamentary seat. He had initially assumed their ambitions would extend no further than becoming the market district's police commissioner or a member of the Trier City Council.
Intis functioned as a parliamentary republic, where members of parliament represented various constituencies and formed the National Convention. This Convention held the authority to appoint the president, prime minister, who in turn appointed ministers—although their decisions required approval from the Convention.
The National Convention also possessed the power to legislate, declare war, and determine the government's budget. Each member of parliament held considerable influence and authority.
At present, the National Convention consisted of over 300 individuals, with one-tenth of them being former nobles. The Sauron family, once part of the royal lineage, served as their leaders. The remaining seats were allocated based on the economic status of different provinces and territories, particularly the prosperous Trier Greater Region.
Trier, whether in terms of population or economic prowess, stood unrivaled in Intis and the Greater Trier Region. It held nearly 40 seats in the National Convention.
These approximately 40 seats were distributed among 20 districts, accommodating as few as one member of parliament or as many as four to five. These representatives also held ex officio positions as councilors in the City Council.

The Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, a relatively small constituency, possessed only one seat in the National Convention. The individual chosen to fill this seat would wield immense power and influence within the region.
Currently, the ruling National Party, the popular Enlightenment Party, and the Revolutionary Party, seeking to address existing flaws, were vigorously preparing for the upcoming National Convention elections.
The party that secured a simple majority in the Convention would become the new ruling party. Otherwise, they would have to negotiate, compromise, and form a coalition with another party.
In addition to the National Party, the Enlightenment Party, and the Revolutionary Party, Intis also had the Emperor Party (restorationists who advocated Roselle's rule) and the Carbonari. They voiced discontentment with the current system and sought to bring about change through force.
The mobsters replied one after another, assuring "Hammer" Ait that nothing would go awry.
However, they remained tight-lipped about which faction or candidate they supported, leaving Lumian feeling a sense of disappointment.
Tell me!
After briefing them on the election, "Hammer" Ait instructed his subordinates, saying, "Leave for a while. Return only when I summon you."
What is his plan? Lumian's eavesdropping had taken him by surprise.
Soon enough, the mobsters vacated the room, leaving "Hammer" Ait alone.
Lumian refrained from taking immediate action. After careful analysis, he believed that the confrontation between him and Hammer Ait in the washroom would have a more targeted impact than engaging outside, even without resorting to the use of Fallen Mercury.
The room beyond fell into an eerie silence. Lumian strained his ears and managed to catch faint voices.
It seemed like "Hammer" Ait was muttering to himself, "Protector of Evil People... The Lady who Births Deities..."
The Lady who Births Deities? That sounds impressive... Is Ait praying to some secret entity? There are about four or five sentences, and it's more of a description? It deviates from the usual three-stanza template... Lumian made a rough guess at what "Hammer" Ait was up to.
As for whom he was praying to, Lumian couldn't even begin to

speculate based on the fragmented description he barely heard.
It lay beyond the scope of his current knowledge in mysticism.
Lumian felt a vague sense of malevolence emanating from the room outside.
Indeed, it was as if the room itself had turned wicked.
Holding his breath, Lumian composed himself, refraining from listening to the turmoil outside.
After a while, the sinister atmosphere dissipated, and everything returned to normal.
Lumian let out a slow exhale, heating up his palm.
At that moment, "Hammer" Ait summoned his subordinates, who had previously left the room, to return.
Lumian continued to bide his time.
Seconds turned into minutes until finally, he heard the heaviest footsteps approaching the washroom.
They belonged to "Hammer" Ait. Lumian had already distinguished their sound.
Swiftly, he retrieved a metal canister marked with a symbol.
Unscrewing the cap, he inserted a thin, pre-kneaded paper ball into the bottle.
Seconds before the footsteps drew near the washroom, Lumian retrieved the paper ball and twisted the cap shut.
He then tore the paper ball in two and inserted each piece into his nostrils.
The stench, reminiscent of fermented excrement, assaulted Lumian's senses, nearly bringing him to tears. His right hand instinctively moved to remove the thin paper ball.
With great resolve and the endurance of an Alms Monk accustomed to extreme environments, Lumian exercised control. His expression contorted, and his muscles twitched ever so slightly as he stood there, retrieving another metal canister filled mostly with gas. He unscrewed its cap.
Clang!
"Hammer" Ait shut the washroom door and approached the toilet bowl.
The space now became partially enclosed. Only the gaps between the door and windows allowed a hint of fresh air to seep in.
Yes, a gruesome encounter awaits him... Lumian observed the fluctuations in his target's luck, silently tossing the open metal canister into the air, allowing the colorless and odorless gas within to disperse and fill the washroom.
This was the sedative concocted by the perverted Hedsey. Even catching a whiff of it at close range could severely weaken an Assassin's strength!

It was ideal for a confined, partially enclosed space like the washroom.
This was the trap Lumian had set for "Hammer" Ait!
Of course, it would take some time for the gas to spread throughout the washroom and take effect to a certain extent. After all, Lumian himself wasn't breathing it in at close proximity.
What Lumian needed to do next was to prevent "Hammer" Ait from leaving the washroom or allow anyone outside to open the door.
He placed the open metal canister by the edge of the bathtub and retrieved Jenna's revolver, aiming it at the toilet bowl through the curtain.

Chapter 169: Battle in the Room

The rush of water persisted, and Lumian grew anxious, fearing that "Hammer" Ait might sense danger. He needed to calculate the height just right before pulling the trigger.

Bang!

The bullet tore through the drapes, leaving behind searing scorch marks.

"Hammer" Ait's hair stood on end before any of this happened. He paid no mind to the fact that he was mid-stream and promptly collapsed to the side.

Yellowish liquid splattered in all directions. The bullet grazed Ait's arm, striking the wall and narrowly missing Lumian on the rebound.

Lumian's revolver flew from his grip after a missed shot. He seized the edges of the curtain, yanked it off, and used it to ensnare Ait.

Before Ait could recover from the agonizing cramps, darkness enveloped his vision, and he found himself wrapped in a cream-colored shower curtain.

Unfazed, he rolled and concealed himself beside the bathtub. Then, he grasped the shower curtain with both hands, using it as an improvised weapon.

With a soft whoosh, the curtain, now wrapped around Lumian's fist, veered off course, thwarting his attempt to strike Ait's head.

Ait seized the moment and rose, inadvertently tearing his pants in the process.

He swung his heavy fist at Lumian, hammer-like.

Lumian quickly raised his arm to shield himself, realizing that his opponent possessed exceptional strength—he couldn't withstand it.

Forced to retreat a step in order to regain his balance, Lumian found himself on the backfoot. Ait wasted no time, relentlessly bombarding him with a flurry of punches from both hands.

Leveraging his height, long arms, and superior strength, Ait employed straightforward punches akin to cannonballs, neglecting any fancy techniques.

It was only then that he could clearly discern the assailant's visage.

Golden hair tinged with black, bright and light-blue eyes, nostrils stuffed with bits of white paper—creating a peculiar sight.

Ciel? The same Ciel who killed Margot and gravely injured Wilson?

Ait felt initial surprise, followed swiftly by delight.

He isn't that formidable. I can take him down completely!

The washroom proved confining, with Lumian enduring the putrid

stench. He suffered two blows from the towering 1.9-meter giant before finding himself forced two steps back, cornered near the door.
At that moment, the mobsters outside heard the gunshots and hurriedly approached. One of them gripped the handle and pushed open the door.
Just as Ait's leg aimed for a low kick, Lumian's left leg suddenly swung back, forcefully striking the door.
With a resounding clang, the partially opened wooden door snapped shut again, narrowly missing the mobster's nose.
Realizing they couldn't breach the door for the time being, the mobsters drew their revolvers and aimed at the wooden barrier from various heights, but they dared not open fire.
They possessed some modicum of intellect, knowing that the washroom was cramped, and they remained uncertain of the person on the other side. Blindly firing would risk harming or even killing their boss, Hammer, leading to unforeseen consequences.
Capitalizing on his kick against the rear door, Lumian contorted his body, evading Ait's straight punch and positioning himself beside his adversary.
Delivering a series of rapid strikes—punches, elbows, knees, and kicks—Lumian sought to disrupt the enemy's assault before they could fully unleash their power.
It resembled a Pugilist, the kind who habitually expelled force with grunts of "Heh!" and "Hah!", but now capable of only a single "Heh!"
Each time Ait tried to strike with force, Lumian took the initiative and forcefully blocked him.
After altering his combat strategy, Lumian managed to narrow the strength gap between them. Not only did he regain some control, but he also utilized his greater agility to shift his body and change positions.
Soon enough, the figure blocking the washroom entrance turned out to be Ait, his back against the door.
Worried that his subordinates might lack intelligence and open fire from outside, accidentally killing him, Ait quickly diverted his attention and shouted, "Do not fire!"
Despite Ciel utilizing his technique to bridge the gap, Ait remained unfazed. He exuded immense confidence.
As long as he acted in a normal manner, he was certain he could eliminate his opponent in the confined washroom environment. The only uncertainty was the duration it would take.
Nevertheless, Ait remained vigilant. He continued to unleash powerful punches and kicks, attempting to force Lumian toward the window, creating an opportunity for his subordinates to enter.

Fearing that Lumian possessed some kind of Beyonder power, Ait believed that using the threat of a revolver would expedite the process of dispatching his enemy.
Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Lumian faced the relentless onslaught of the Pugilist's full-powered attacks without showing any signs of surrender. However, he found it increasingly strenuous.
Throughout this ordeal, Ait's eyes darted to his surroundings, wary of potential traps or powerful allies lying in ambush.
His gaze swept across the edge of the bathtub and landed on an open metal canister.
What purpose does it serve? Before Ait could ponder further, Lumian's mocking smile appeared, accompanied by a curse as he struggled to block Ait's onslaught.
"Useless piece of junk! What are you waiting for? Those outside, come in and lend a hand!"
A buzzing anger surged within Ait.
He discarded all other concerns and launched an unusually ferocious attack.
Provocation!
Lumian had added Provocation to those two sentences!
Confronted with the raging "Hammer" Ait and his devastating blows, Lumian fought desperately to hold his ground. Occasionally, he relied on the flexibility of a Dancer to shift positions.
Unbeknownst to him, he was gradually being pushed toward the wall with the window.
This allowed the washroom door to open, but the mobsters outside hesitated, fearing they might collide with "Hammer" if they kicked it open. They cautiously pushed it inward, inch by inch.
In that moment, Lumian, nearly overcome by the putrid odor, keenly sensed Ait's waning strength and slower attacks.
The sedative took effect! Lumian swiftly dodged to the side, regaining his balance. He threw a powerful punch, channeling all the strength from his arm and waist, launching a counterattack.
Bang!
Ait's arm, which had blocked the blow, visibly trembled, and his eyes betrayed a mix of surprise and panic.
Why? Why have I grown so weak?
Why have my reflexes slowed?
As Lumian grasped the state of his opponent, he unleashed two consecutive straight punches, forcefully parting the enemy's arms.
Without hesitation, he closed the distance and adjusted his body slightly. With a swift motion, he drove his left elbow into Ait's chest.

Caught off guard, Ait failed to react in time, unable to dodge the strike. The elbow connected, cracking his sternum. His vision darkened, and he struggled to catch his breath.
Lumian didn't grant him a moment's respite. He smoothly shifted his body, allowing his poised right fist to collide with Ait's abdomen.
He hadn't harbored any lofty expectations of rendering Ait unconscious solely with the sedative. After all, the other party possessed the ability to resist the effects of certain Beyonder powers through sheer physical and mental fortitude, suggesting a high resistance to the sedative. Furthermore, despite the compactness and semi-enclosed nature of the washroom, with its bathtub, toilet bowl, and sink, the drug's potency would be greatly diminished.
Lumian aimed to exploit the drug's influence to weaken Ait's combat prowess, slowing his reactions and substantially reducing his strength.
In doing so, the tide of victory would tip towards him uncontrollably!
Pfft!
Ait, reeling from the blow to his abdomen, instinctively curled up, becoming shorter than Lumian.
Seizing the opportunity, Lumian raised his fists and swiftly hammered them behind Ait's ears.
Bang!
Amidst the cacophony, Ait's vision faded to black, and he slumped unconscious.
It was the combined effect of a potent strike and the sedative.
Lumian squatted down, using "Hammer" as a shield.
The mobsters had already held the washroom door open for several seconds, but with Ait obstructing Lumian from their view, they refrained from opening fire.
Now, they witnessed their towering boss, Hammer, being taken down by the assailant.
Lumian clasped Ait and offered a smirk to the group gathered at the door.
"Go ahead! Fire! Why aren't you firing?"
One of the mobsters caught sight of the assailant's distinctive blonde and black hair, coupled with his rather handsome face, and suddenly pieced together a series of connections.
"Ciel? You're Ciel?" he exclaimed, his surprise evident.
The same Ciel who killed Boss Margot and threw Boss Wilson off the fourth floor?
Ciel of the Savoie Mob?

He's back at it?
Lumian keenly sensed the mobsters' profound fear. He grinned and gave Ait's shoulder a friendly pat, brushing off the dust.
Then, he took hold of Ait and proceeded towards the washroom door, one step at a time.
Simultaneously, he curled his lips into a smile.
"You've got two options. One, leave this room now and seek help from your Poison Spur Mob boss. Two, meet your demise here, one by one, at my hands."
As he spoke, he advanced, a cold gaze sweeping across the faces of each mobster, as if contemplating the best way to eliminate them.
The mobsters couldn't help but tremble, as a similar thought crossed their minds: Regardless, Boss Hammer has been apprehended. If we open fire, we'll only harm him. It might be wiser to seek help from the boss!
"Well?" Lumian snorted, urging them to decide.
With a swift swoosh, the first mobster turned on his heels and fled the room. The others followed suit, abandoning any notion of confrontation.
When no one remained, Lumian let out a silent sigh of relief.
If those men had truly steeled themselves, their hearts unswayed by fear, the confined space of the washroom and their ten firearms would have posed a lethal threat.
Of course, Ait could forget about survival as well.
They have no more than four minutes to reach Avenue du Marché from here... I must conclude the interrogation before "Black Scorpion" Roger and his comrades depart, granting me ample time to escape the scene and locate Baron Brignais at Salle de Bal Brise...
Just four minutes... As Lumian assessed the current situation, he squatted down and propped Ait against the washroom's door panel.
Then, he dislocated his captive's shoulder joints and bound his legs together using a shower curtain. Opening the window, he allowed the breeze to circulate from both sides.
With these tasks completed, Lumian removed the paper balls from his own nose, retrieved the metal canister containing the pungent gas, and held it to Ait's nostrils.
Achoo!
Ait sneezed, his eyes fluttering open.
Lumian promptly stowed away the metal canister, capping it, ensuring the other party remained in a weakened state.
"What do you want?" Ait asked, fear and anxiety evident in his eyes as he recognized the person before him.

Chapter 170: Nightstalkers

Lumian brandished Hedsey's dagger, a sly grin forming on his face.

"I've got a question for you."

"You could've come straight to me. No need for all this," Ait instinctively tried to stall for time.

With a quick glance, he scanned the room from the corner of his eye, but there were no lifeless bodies to be found.

Based on his combat with Ciel, Ait knew it was impossible for the other party to eliminate ten armed thugs without a single one escaping.

In fact, even Ait himself wouldn't dare to face the encirclement of ten revolvers in such a confined space. He might take down three or four of them, but he would surely meet his demise.

If Ait, with his abilities, couldn't pull it off, there was no way Ciel—who he believed to be somewhat weaker and reliant on cunning strategies—could achieve such a feat.

Given the circumstances, Ait assumed most of his ten subordinates had fled, while a few might have sought assistance from the Black Scorpion.

With this realization, a strong desire to survive surged within Ait.

As long as I don't anger Ciel and can buy myself six to seven minutes, there's a good chance I'll be saved!

"If I hadn't done this, how else could I have crossed paths with you, considering my relationship with your Poison Spur Mob?" Lumian deliberately created the illusion that he didn't intend to spill blood. He raised the dagger, emphasizing his point.

"Enough with the games. Answer my questions. You know I'm not a patient person. If you refuse or lie, I'll end your life right here. I can always ask 'Baldy' Harman later. After all, there are plenty of folks in your Poison Spur Mob who know about those matters."

Lumian had compelled the mobsters to depart, not only due to the situation but also to seize control of the situation.

If he didn't make Ait believe he still had a fighting chance, prying answers from him in a short amount of time without employing mystical means would be futile.

A person who clung to hope would fear death all the more!

Ait promptly responded, "Alright!"

He resolved to divulge some information, delving into the details, hoping to hold out for those crucial six to seven minutes.

Naturally, he contemplated whether Ciel might abandon the inquiry at the last moment and execute him. Yet, aside from cooperating, Ait had no other choice. He could only hope the

information he shared would be valuable enough to captivate Ciel's interest and prevent an untimely demise.
About three minutes... Lumian silently counted the seconds and posed his next question.
"Have you encountered Louis Lund?"
Ait hesitated.
In a swift motion, Lumian swung the dagger, piercing Ait's shoulder and eliciting a gush of crimson blood.
"This is your warning—the final one," Lumian calmly stated, retracting the dagger.
Ait, his expression contorted, felt the unyielding ruthlessness emanating from Lumian and sensed the specter of impending death drawing near. Fear gripped his heart.
He blurted out, "Yes! Wanted posters for Louis Lund can be found in Salle de Gristmill and many other places. The moment I laid eyes on him at the Boss's hideout, I recognized him."
Ait realized he couldn't rely on silence and hesitation to gain more time. That would only lead to uncontrollable consequences.
Lying was also risky since he couldn't be certain which questions Ciel was using to test his honesty.
In comparison, offering convoluted yet seemingly valuable information would be more likely to appease the other party.
As expected... Lumian was delighted.
Having confirmed the connection between Louis Lund and the Poison Spur Mob's "Black Scorpion" Roger, Lumian had achieved his objective for this operation. The remaining questions were just an added bonus. It would be nice to get answers, but it wouldn't be a deal-breaker if he didn't.
"Why did he go to 'Black Scorpion' Roger?" Lumian inquired further.
Ait shook his head.
"I'm not aware of the specifics, but I've heard that the lady Louis Lund is loyal to has arrived in Trier. She wants our Poison Spur Mob and their respective spheres of influence to coordinate efforts and avoid conflicts.
"Our boss, with the approval of Madame Moon, took charge of the liaison."
"Madame Moon?" Lumian never expected another Madame Moon to enter the picture.
He didn't even know what was happening with Madame Night.
"Madame Moon is the one the Poison Spur Mob swears loyalty to. Well, our boss has mentioned that she's not just a Madame anymore, but a Lady who Births Deities. We often offer prayers to her. I haven't seen her myself; only the Boss and Baldy have."
Not Madame... From Madame Moon to Lady who Births Deities...

Had she received more boons and elevated her status? Lumian nodded in understanding.
"What's the relationship between Madame Moon and Madame Night?"
"They both belong to an organization called the Nightstalkers. Madame Moon appears to be the leader, or at least a significant figure at the leadership level." Ait provided a convoluted description of what he knew.
A secret organization that believes in some hidden existence? Lumian redirected the conversation to the matter that intrigued him the most.
"Will Louis Lund visit 'Black Scorpion' Roger again?"
"He'll likely come back next week to check if everyone has followed through on their agreements and if any adjustments are needed. I don't know the exact timing," Ait honestly responded.
I'll have the chance to reunite with Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché next week? And I'll be stationed there permanently after Sunday! Lumian felt a surge of delight and excitement.
He then pressed on, asking,
"What kind of power does 'Black Scorpion' Roger possess?"
"H-he's a Heretic Spellmaster," Ait stammered instinctively. "Our boss said it himself. The essence of a Heretic Spellmaster is using their life force to cast spells. It can be their own life force or someone else's, but it seems they need to be controlled beforehand."
So he truly is a Heretic Spellmaster... Truly wicked and cruel... Lumian recalled the battle with the midwife.
Observing Lumian's lack of surprise, Ait felt a sense of relief for not lying. He continued, "I've witnessed him using a few spells. One is a peculiar curse, another involves manipulating blood, then there's a kind of black flame that weakens people, and finally, he has some effects on corpses and ghosts. I don't know much else."
There's at least one more—the ability to create a 'turf' filled with undead creatures, allowing him to share damage and mysteriously teleport... Lumian silently muttered, his gaze fixed on Ait, gesturing for him to continue.
Ait steeled himself and spoke.
"Our boss also mentioned that if we perform well, he might receive more boons and become a Sower."
Having said that, Ait regretted his decision not to choose a boon back then and instead opt for a potion. It had caused his progress to be hindered by the need for ingredients and other factors. The hope of reaching Sequence 7 seemed distant.
As long as one contributed enough and their body could withstand

it, they could attain more boons.
A Sower? A symbol of abundance and life? Hmm, when Madame Pualis was still Pulitt, he had many illegitimate children. He was despised by countless people in the Darième area, to the point that his family had to disown him and pretend he had gone missing... *Could this be a manifestation of a Sower's powers?* Did Pulitt lose control under the influence of the boons? And after becoming a Sower, it appears that he underwent a gender transformation. Is that the level equivalent to the Madames, or is it one Sequence higher than them? Lumian's mind raced with numerous thoughts.
Observing Lumian's expression, Ait continued speaking.
"I don't know what comes after Sower. All I know is that Wilson is a Villain, equivalent to Sequence 9. Harman is a Gardener, and his strength is similar to mine, but he possesses extensive knowledge of botany. He can create potions with magical effects. Yes, he has a potion that temporarily hardens his skin like tree bark. I tried slashing him with a knife, but he only suffered minor injuries. He also has medicines to treat various illnesses and injuries."
So, becoming a Heretic Spellmaster requires being a Gardener. No wonder the midwife used those giant scissors as a weapon... Fortunately, I obtained this information. If I had assassinated "Baldy" Harman without giving him time to react, he wouldn't have used his body to shield Fallen Mercury... Targeted intelligence is truly valuable... Lumian sighed with a mix of emotions.
Ait pondered for a moment and continued, "Harman once mentioned that the spiritual monsters born from trees and flowers become highly frightened when they see him since he is a Gardener and responsible for their pruning."
Ait, who was trying to buy more time, quickly brought up another topic.
"Our boss mentioned that among the unrecognized paramount beings, only three can bestow godhood without much difficulty. One is the Great Mother of our faith, another has 'Desire' and 'Tree' in its name, and the third appears to be a mysterious fog. As for the other beings, if they wish to grant godhood, they have to perform a very, very complex ritual that would easily be discovered and destroyed."
The Mother Tree of Desire? What sets them apart from the being with the name Inevitability? Why can they bestow godhood without the need for an extensive ritual? Heh heh, I wonder what will happen when a Gardener encounters a Fallen Tree Spirit, the latter undergoing a suppression brought about by their inherent order in the hierarchy? Lumian's thoughts raced, and he suddenly changed the subject.

"Who is the candidate for parliament you support?"
"It's Hugues Artois from the Enlightenment Party." Ait's anticipation grew as he noticed that quite some time had passed.
If those rascals hurry, they'll meet the Boss!
Ait, who was waiting for Lumian to ask about the Poison Spur Mob's recent plans, suddenly saw the other party raise his right hand and swing his dagger.
With a soft sound, the dagger pierced Ait's temples and stirred them a few times.
Ait's mouth hung open in horror, and his eyes grew desperate and unfocused.
With a thud, he collapsed, no longer drawing breath.
Lumian left the dagger lodged in Ait's head and swiftly bandaged his wounds. He then stowed away his belongings, shouldered the lifeless body, and pushed open the room's window before leaping down.
Since it was only the second floor, his landing was steady, and he broke into a run.
Instead of taking the most direct route, Lumian opted for a detour through Rue du Rossignol, making his way to Avenue du Marché.
The late-night atmosphere offered scarce street lamps, casting a pitch-black darkness that seemed to consume anyone on the road.
It took Lumian over two minutes to carry Ait's corpse to the entrance of Salle de Bal Brise.
The two mobsters guarding the entrance were about to halt him when they recognized Ciel's face.
As a result, they ceased their interference and allowed him to enter.
...
In the second-floor café, Louis approached Baron Brignais's side, carrying a stack of papers, a black revolver, a bayonet, and a bag of bullets.
"Baron, I have everything prepared for Ciel."
More information and weapons.
Baron Brignais nodded.
"Send them to Auberge du Coq Doré tomorrow morning."
After issuing the instructions, Baron Brignais spoke with anticipation, "I wonder what kind of performance he will stage for us and when he will make his move. Do you think he will choose 'Hammer' Ait, 'Baldy' Harman, or 'Short-legged Candlestick'..."
Before Baron Brignais could finish his sentence, the sound of approaching footsteps interrupted him.
The mobster guarding the first-floor entrance wore a terrified expression as he addressed Baron Brignais, "C-Ciel is here! He—he's

carrying someone—or rather, a corpse!"
At that moment, Lumian emerged from the staircase, a smile on his face. His steps seemed heavier than usual.
"That is?" Baron Brignais looked at the lifeless body trailing behind Ciel, a mixture of confusion and seriousness on his face.
Lumian tossed the corpse to the ground, clapped his hands, and grinned.
"'Hammer' Ait."

Chapter 171: Rapid Idea

With a resounding thud, the lifeless body crashed to the floor, sending a shockwave through the hearts of Baron Brignais, Louis, and their comrades.

Baron Brignais rose to his feet and beheld the corpse lying at Lumian's feet. He took in the tangle of abundant, disheveled brown hair, the lengthy limbs, and the imposing, robust physique.

It was none other than "Hammer" Ait!

Louis's eyes widened in disbelief at the realization that the treacherous member of the Savoie Mob lay dead on the café floor.

The baron had entrusted the task to Ciel right after dinner, and the hour had not even struck ten.

What's more, Ciel had managed to accomplish the mission before they could deliver the comprehensive intelligence and weaponry that would have enhanced his chances of success.

Moreover, "Hammer" Ait was a true Beyonder, surpassing even Wilson from before in strength. He wasn't as vulnerable as Margot, always surrounded by a retinue of followers. Yet, he had failed to survive three hours after the baron had issued the assignment.

Was this any different from purchasing a pig at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman and slaughtering it?

Even if the baron had taken personal action, it wouldn't have been that effortless or straightforward. It could have even ended in failure.

Louis's gaze shifted from the lifeless body to Ciel's countenance, as if only now did he truly perceive the true nature of this rural novice.

It was somewhat understandable that Margot had fallen prey to him due to carelessness and the poisoned slash. Wilson's defeat could be explained away by his own feebleness and entrapment within the room. However, "Hammer" Ait was a Beyonder whose combat prowess was not significantly inferior to the baron's, and he had always been on high alert against potential assassinations by the Savoie Mob. He wouldn't have been careless.

Yet, Ciel had managed to dispatch such a formidable adversary within a matter of hours!

Just how formidable was he?

What were his limits?

In comparison to the baron, who was the stronger one?

A cascade of questions raced through Louis's mind, and his gaze at Lumian now held a tinge of fear.

The other thugs shared the same unease.

Baron Brignais's gaze constantly shifted between "Hammer" Ait's

lifeless form and Lumian's visage, as if searching for any trace of deceit.
Had Lumian Lee effortlessly completed a mission that the baron himself would have considered challenging?
If "Hammer" Ait was so easily dispatched, why had the Savoie Mob, who had long sought to punish the traitor, allowed him to live until now?
This guy is even more terrifying than I had suspected. In terms of strength, intelligence, execution, and seizing opportunities, he is no less capable than I am... He must be concealing some secrets. There's more to him than meets the eye... Baron Brignais barely contained the turmoil within his heart and reclaimed the clarity, rationality, and intelligence he typically boasted.
Just as he was about to bestow his usual smile and commendation upon Lumian Lee, signifying his intent to inform his superiors of Lumian's contributions to the Savoie Mob, a sudden realization dawned upon him.
Baron Brignais's expression turned to stone as he locked eyes with Lumian.
"Does anyone else know that you've taken down 'Hammer' Ait?"
Lumian replied candidly, "Quite a few."
Baron Brignais's countenance underwent a dramatic shift, losing its refined and confident air.
In that moment, all he wanted was to unleash a torrent of curses upon Lumian.
*Is your f*cking brain filled with shit?* So many people are aware of your involvement in 'Hammer' Ait's demise, and yet you boldly bring his lifeless body to Salle de Bal Brise, right in front of me?
Do you think that these individuals won't inform 'Black Scorpion' Roger? Do you believe he won't storm into Salle de Bal Brise seeking revenge?
Do you think I can fend off 'Black Scorpion' Roger? Damn it, you're leading me to my own demise!
You better find a bloody corner to hide in at Underground Trier!
Seizing the opportunity presented by Baron Brignais's subdued breathing and silence, Lumian smiled nonchalantly and said, "'Hammer' Ait's subordinates must have found 'Black Scorpion' Roger by now. Only you, Baron, can offer me sufficient protection.
"Baron, weren't you anticipating retaliation from the Poison Spur Mob? That's why you sent me to hunt down one of the trio—Hammer, Baldy, or Short-legged Candlestick?"
Bitterness filled Baron Brignais's mouth at Lumian's question. For a brief moment, he couldn't bring himself to order Lumian to leave.
He had made two plans in preparation for the potential revenge

from the Poison Spur Mob. He was confident that he would remain unscathed.
Wouldn't it be a fortuitous outcome if "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo met their end?
But the predicament lay in the fact that he hadn't had enough time to implement any of his plans or set them into motion!
His intention was to dispatch the intelligence and weaponry to Auberge du Coq Doré tomorrow morning, and only then would he decide on the course of action. Nonetheless, eliminating any leader of the Poison Spur Mob was no easy feat. It would likely require days of meticulous effort before he could even set foot inside their domain.
Yet, Lumian Lee, that madman, had sought out "Hammer" Ait without delay upon accepting the mission. He wasted no time, conducted no reconnaissance, made no arrangements, and didn't wait for the opportune moment to arise.
What further infuriated the baron was that the fellow had actually succeeded! In a matter of hours, he had slain "Hammer" Ait and dragged the lifeless body to Salle de Bal Brise!
F*ck, is he even human?
This caught him off guard. If "Black Scorpion" Roger were to strike, he might meet his demise alongside "Hammer" Ait.
Observing Baron Brignais's silence and darkened expression, Lumian inwardly chuckled.
He had brought "Hammer" Ait's body to Salle de Bal Brise and presented it to Baron Brignais not to boast or intimidate the gang leader and his henchmen.
His intention was to draw "Black Scorpion" Roger and the other formidable members of the Poison Spur Mob to them!
If Baron Brignais were to fall, a new opportunity would arise. A replacement with sufficient strength would be required. When the time came, Ciel, who could fight, contribute, and had aided Red Boots' lover, would undoubtedly be the most sought-after candidate!
Lumian wasn't overly concerned about whether "Black Scorpion" Roger would kill him.
Mr. K's finger was in his pocket!
Mr. K probably wouldn't mind if I repurposed the finger. After all, I'm doing it to fulfill his mission... Lumian thought casually.
Regardless, the threat from Susanna Mattise wouldn't come anytime soon. He could figure out an alternative approach later. Perhaps Mr. K would reward him with another finger once he saw how well and swiftly Lumian completed the mission?
Baron Brignais's expression underwent several changes. He pushed

his chair back abruptly and hurried toward an iron-colored mechanical safe at the café bar counter.
He turned the knob and entered the password.
Lumian watched with a raised eyebrow, puzzled.
What was Baron Brignais planning to retrieve? Was he intending to take the cash and flee?
Or did he possess Sealed Artifacts that he dared not carry with him, fearing their potent negative effects, and had stowed them away in the safe?
Soon enough, Baron Brignais opened the safe and retrieved two bundles of detonators—commonly used in quarries.
Setting a trap to explode "Black Scorpion" Roger? That's quite challenging. He's a Heretic Spellmaster... Lumian refrained from inquiring as he observed Baron Brignais walk toward the wall near Avenue du Marché and push open two glass windows.
The leader of the Savoie Mob placed the bundles of detonators on the windowsill, then lit a match.
Subsequently, he ignited one of the bundles and glanced at the dimly lit Avenue du Marché. Raising his hand, he tossed the explosives into the middle of the road.
Louis and the other mobsters stood in bewilderment, unable to comprehend the baron's intentions.
Lumian's thoughts raced, and he instantly grasped the plan. He couldn't help but inwardly applaud, Very clever...
Boom!
The bundle of detonators exploded in the middle of Avenue du Marché, causing the surrounding glass to rattle.
The few pedestrians on the roadside were startled and fell to the ground, sustaining minor injuries. Some screamed, covering their ears, and frantically sought shelter in nearby locations.
Baron Brignais glanced over, lit another bundle of detonators, and hurled it into the deserted road. Causing casualties would be troublesome aftermath. He didn't wish to attract unwanted attention from authorities.
Boom!
The explosion reverberated once more. The police headquarters on Avenue du Marché, the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, and the God of Steam and Machinery cathedral responded to a certain extent.
Salle de Bal Brise and the occupants of nearby buildings were thrown into disarray, but they dared not venture outside.
Baron Brignais clapped his hands and returned to the wooden table. He pulled a chair over and sat down.
Resuming his usual demeanor, he smiled at Lumian.
"It's all right now."

This would surely unsettle the police and the clergymen. Some would undoubtedly investigate the cause. It was highly probable that official Beyonders would be among them.
Officers who maintained good relations with the Savoie Mob would inevitably inquire.
Under such circumstances, how could "Black Scorpion" Roger dare to launch an attack?
They couldn't risk assuming that no official Beyonders would care about the explosion. After all, if they lost that bet, they would be doomed!
Lumian hadn't expected Baron Brignais to find a way to elude "Black Scorpion" Roger's assault in such a short span of time. And he had accomplished it using only the resources at hand.
This had momentarily foiled his plan.
True to the reputation of the Savoie Mob's 'brain,' Baron Brignais displays remarkable responsiveness and quick thinking, surpassing even Margot, "Hammer" Ait, and the others in critical moments. Lumian clicked his tongue in acknowledgment, paying no mind to Hammer's lifeless body on the ground. Taking a seat across from Baron Brignais, he flashed a smile.
"I made the wise choice to seek refuge here."
Baron Brignais nearly choked, his saliva catching in his throat.
Had it not been for his exceptional intellect, he might have been ensnared and faced a grave fate!
Exhaling slowly, Baron Brignais cast a glance at the motionless corpse and addressed Louis and the rest, "Drag it into a private room and conceal it carefully. The authorities will likely come knocking soon."

Chapter 172: Superintendent

After concealing the body, Baron Brignais nonchalantly addressed Lumian, his curiosity piqued.

"I must say, I'm quite intrigued. How did you manage to eliminate 'Hammer' Ait?"

Lumian didn't hold back, revealing everything. He retrieved an empty metal canister and placed it on the table before him.

"What's this?" Baron Brignais examined it carefully for a few moments.

"Remember when I ventured underground earlier today?" Lumian grinned. "I encountered a deviant individual and, quite accidentally, dispatched him. He happened to possess this gaseous sedative and its corresponding antidote."

"After infiltrating 'Hammer' Ait's washroom, I consumed the antidote and patiently awaited his arrival. When he entered, I unscrewed the sedative and engaged him in close combat. I restrained him, preventing his escape until the sedative took effect."

Baron Brignais pondered for a brief moment, confirming the plausibility of this plan. Satisfied, he nodded and remarked, "The washroom is rather confined, and the gaseous sedative will quickly permeate the space. Moreover, there's no ventilation to speak of. Considering 'Hammer' Ait's cautious nature and his guard against our Savoie Mob, he wouldn't offer an easy opportunity for infiltration."

"The gunmen stationed outside wouldn't dare to open fire, lest they accidentally eliminate 'Hammer' Ait. They might even struggle to unlock the restroom door."

Baron Brignais spoke with such conviction that it seemed he had witnessed the scene firsthand.

Louis and the others silently acknowledged the validity of this analysis.

Having understood the intricacies, they realized that Ciel's ability to dispatch "Hammer" Ait within such a short span of time wasn't as implausible as they had initially thought.

Ciel had indeed discovered a path to success and skillfully utilized the resources at his disposal.

Under this plan, as long as his combat prowess didn't significantly pale in comparison to "Hammer" Ait's, he had a considerable chance of dealing with the traitor.

Naturally, achieving success necessitated strength, a stroke of luck, decisiveness, audacity, and adeptness in gathering intelligence.

Ciel's terror was undeniable, yet it wasn't as horrifying as they had envisioned.
Baron Brignais further commended Lumian's sagacity, albeit slightly displeased that he had transported "Hammer" Ait's lifeless body to Salle de Bal Brise after accomplishing the deed. It had nearly brought calamity upon him.
Nevertheless, Baron Brignais harbored no intention of reprimanding him.
Upon reflection, he realized that the fault lay primarily with himself.
It seems I habitually exude an excessive air of confidence and intellect. As if nothing can perplex me. No wonder he assumes that I can provide ample protection and remain unafraid of 'Black Scorpion' Roger.
I even proposed this operation. It's only natural for him to believe that I've already made all necessary preparations.
As they conversed, time slipped away. Before long, a guard from the Savoie Mob stationed at the entrance on the first floor ascended and approached Baron Brignais, conveying a message.
"Baron, Superintendent Everett has arrived."
"Please, bring him up." Baron Brignais stood and made his way toward the staircase.
Travis Everett served as the superintendent at the police headquarters of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. He held one of the highest positions when it came to carrying out tasks. Above him stood a few deputy directors with the rank of chief superintendent, and overseeing everything was the police commissioner of the district.
Baron Brignais enjoyed conversing with Everett. Emperor Roselle's words described him as the epitome of a "Mr. Nice Guy." He preferred not to delve into the truth, simply hoping for harmonious interactions and a lack of trouble. He possessed a remarkable ability to resolve conflicts between the mobs in the market district.
Ten seconds later, the officer led his two subordinates into the café on the second floor.
Travis Everett appeared to be around 30 years old and stood nearly 1.75 meters tall. His black hair was cropped short, and he wore glasses with relatively large black frames that framed his blue eyes. His chin was slightly broad.
Dressed in a black police uniform, his epaulets showcased five-petaled irises in silver-white against the black background. This indicated his rank as a superintendent. If there were seven petals, he would hold the rank of chief superintendent, and above that, an

off-white diamond square.
Travis Everett looked at the smiling Baron Brignais and asked with a stern expression, "What just happened? Please don't tell me there was an explosion at the entrance of Salle de Bal Brise, and you have no idea who did it!"
"Monsieur Superintendent, please have a seat." Baron Brignais guided Travis Everett to a wooden table and personally pulled out a chair for him.
Lumian, disguising himself as one of the thugs alongside Louis and the others, stood behind Baron Brignais, avoiding direct confrontation with the officers to prevent recognition as a wanted criminal.
Baron Brignais picked up his mahogany pipe and gazed at Travis Everett across from him. With a grave expression, he spoke, "'Hammer' Ait is dead. I was concerned that 'Black Scorpion' Roger would go into a frenzy, so I detonated the explosives and drew everyone's attention. Rest assured, Monsieur Superintendent, I carefully chose the location of the blast. I didn't harm or seriously injure anyone."
Travis Everett raised his right hand, adjusted his black-framed glasses, and pointed at Baron Brignais.
"Can you all refrain from causing so much trouble? The parliamentary election is taking place next week. Do you want us to embarrass ourselves in front of our future superior?
"I don't care about your intentions, nor do I wish to know your motives. All I desire is a peaceful market district.
"If something similar occurs again, I will propose to Monsieur Aymerck that Bureau 8 and the two Churches form a joint investigative team to handle your Savoie Mob!"
Aymerck served as one of Trier's police commissioners, overseeing Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Travis Everett did not mention the death of "Hammer" Ait directly, but he employed it as a warning to Baron Brignais.
Baron Brignais responded with a smile, "Monsieur Superintendent, fear not. For the next two weeks, we shall strictly adhere to the law. I am merely concerned about the Poison Spur Mob..."
Travis Everett nodded and let out a sigh.
"Emperor Roselle proclaimed that peace brings prosperity. If you do encounter any disputes, you can seek me out for a tribunal."
He then turned to the two lower-ranking officers beside him and said, "Let us return now and find someone to keep a close watch on the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob. We must ensure they behave."
The superintendent rose from his seat and extended his arms.

"Praise the Sun!"
"Praise the Sun!" Baron Brignais also stood up, echoing the sentiment.
As Travis Everett and his companions descended the stairs, Lumian muttered quietly to himself, Do people in positions of power always enjoy quoting Emperor Roselle? We lower-class individuals are different. We curse and use crude language as needed. The sense of a sentence doesn't depend on who utters it...
Nearly half an hour later, Baron Brignais turned to Lumian and spoke, "'Black Scorpion' Roger and the others should be under surveillance. There is no immediate danger.
"You may return to Auberge du Coq Doré to rest now. Come here at 10:30 a.m. tomorrow. I will take you to meet the boss."
"Alright," Lumian replied with a smile. "Thank you, Baron."
He then inquired, "According to the rules, since I was the one who killed 'Hammer' Ait, all his belongings belong to me, correct?"
"That is correct," Baron Brignais confirmed, displaying a generous nature when it came to such matters.
He motioned for Louis to bring over the black revolver, bullet bag, bayonet, and stack of intelligence.
"These are yours as well."
Lumian fastened the holster under his left armpit and stowed away the other items before entering the room where "Hammer" Ait's lifeless body lay.
Ensuring no one was tailing him, he squatted down and unbuttoned the corpse's shirt.
There, he discovered a golden-red ball resembling the morning clouds and sunset, with a faint flickering light dancing within.
This was a Pugilist Beyonder characteristic!
Lumian happily pocketed it and proceeded to search "Hammer" Ait's pockets. He found 116 verl d'or and 17 coppet notes and coins, along with a pair of boxing gloves made of steel-like material, adorned with several sharp spikes.
For Lumian, this bounty far exceeded the satisfaction of hunting Margot.
On his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré, only sporadic gas street lamps illuminated the path. Lumian weaved through the intersecting shadows, sensing pairs of eyes fixated on him.
Is 'Black Scorpion' Roger commanding the deceased or using other Beyonder abilities to keep tabs on me? Or am I simply being overly vigilant and imagining things? Lumian muttered, raising his right hand to massage his temples.
He activated his Spirit Vision but found nothing amiss.
The unsettling feeling of being watched gradually faded away.

...
In the three-story building with a garden at 126 Avenue du Marché.
The imposing "Black Scorpion" Roger, with his piercing deep-blue eyes, and the charming "Baldy" Harman walked back through the door.
The ten members of the Poison Spur Mob, who had been waiting anxiously, felt the air grow tense and their fear heightened. None of them dared to utter a word, as if they were facing an impending storm.
After a tense silence that lasted for more than ten seconds, "Baldy" Harman gritted his teeth and spoke up,
"That Ciel doesn't take us seriously. The Savoie Mob has been provoking us repeatedly. They must pay the price!"
"Black Scorpion" Roger shared Harman's sentiment, feeling equally provoked by Ciel. He spoke in a low, commanding voice,
"We cannot let this matter go unaddressed!"
Phew... Roger exhaled heavily and motioned for the other members of the Poison Spur Mob to leave.
Only Harman remained, and Roger continued, "But we are being targeted by the police. It is highly likely that official Beyonders will be involved. We cannot seek revenge for the time being.
"Brignais is no ordinary opponent. He is cunning and intelligent.
"When Monsieur Artois is elected to parliament, Madame Moon will grant us a new boon. At that time, I will extract Brignais's brain and feed it to the stray dogs!
"However, we cannot remain idle. When the surveillance on us becomes less vigilant, I will seize the opportunity to assassinate Ciel!
"If the Savoie Mob can assassinate our men, then we can do the same to theirs!"
...
At Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian had just reached Room 207 when he sensed something. He turned his head and directed his gaze towards the nearby balcony.
"Come out," he said with a resigned sigh. "Madame Jenna."

Chapter 173: Intelligence on the Boss

With her hair tied up in a simple bun, Showy Diva emerged from the shadows of the balcony, her eyes adorned with dark shadows and a mole positioned neatly on her nose.

Curiosity evident in her voice, she asked, "How did you discover me? How did you know it was me?"

Being an Assassin, she had mastered the art of utilizing darkness and shadows to conceal her presence. Until now, no one had ever detected her in her previous encounters, making this the first time she had been discovered.

Lumian scoffed in response.

"Next time you plan on assassinating someone, remember not to wear perfume."

After reminding Jenna, he jokingly pointed towards the door of Room 207 and said, "I thought you would enter the room yourself, but instead, you waited so politely on the balcony. It's unlike you."

"Dammit, I've always been polite!" Jenna retorted, feeling a hint of anger at the accusation.

After a brief pause, she muttered, "You're cold, sinister, cunning, and devious. You might have set a trap in the room, waiting for someone to walk into it."

While speaking, Jenna glanced at Lumian and indignantly said, "I understand how you guessed that I'm an Assassin!

"First, you connected the dots from the perfect infiltration route I provided. Then, you deliberately probed me. F*ck, if I had been calmer, you would have said, 'Haha, I'm joking.'"

"Madame Jenna, your reflex arc is a little long," Lumian laughed.

"What 'Madame' or 'Miss.' You're not one to be polite either. Just call me Jenna," she controlled her urge to curse and curiously asked, "What's a reflex arc?"

She had a feeling it wasn't something favorable, but she couldn't quite grasp its meaning.

Miss, did you complete your compulsory education? Lumian criticized. As he opened the door, he casually explained, "For instance, you, Franca, Baron Brignais, and 'Hammer' Ait hear me telling a joke simultaneously. Franca and Baron Brignais burst into laughter instantly, but it takes you a whole day to find me and say, 'Haha, how funny.'"

"Dammit! You bastard!" Jenna finally realized she had been mocked.

Following Lumian into Room 207, she asked in confusion, "What about 'Hammer' Ait? Why isn't he laughing?"

Lumian turned his head and solemnly glanced at her.

"Dead people don't laugh."
Jenna was momentarily taken aback before she burst into laughter, her body swaying slightly.
"You, haha, you truly have a sense of humor..." She intermittently expressed amidst her laughter.
Lumian ignited the carbide lamp in the room and settled on the edge of the bed. He inquired, "What brings you to Auberge du Coq Doré?"
"I've come to retrieve my gun!" Jenna shut the door behind her and dragged over the old, worn armchair. Placing it in front of her, she sat down, resting her elbows on the backrest.
Her eyes sparkled with curiosity she couldn't conceal.
"So, you managed to eliminate 'Hammer' Ait. You're even more formidable than I had imagined!
"But don't tell me how you did it just yet. Let me take a guess.
"You... asked me about the size of the washroom. That means you intended to exploit the environment there.
"F*ck! I've got it, I've got it! You have that pervert's sedative on hand. It's perfect for a place like the washroom. It's like trapping a pigeon!
"Dammit, I can imagine 'Hammer' Ait's desperate expression as he struggled, realizing his strength was dwindling. The thugs outside couldn't enter, and they didn't dare to shoot randomly..."
The more Jenna spoke, the more animated she became, as if she were the one who had carried out the assassination of "Hammer" Ait.
"At least you have some wits about you," Lumian begrudgingly acknowledged.
"Heh!" Jenna waved her hand and peered at Lumian. "What I can't figure out is why you weren't affected by the sedative. Did you smell that bottle of 'shit' beforehand? Can its effects last that long?"
Lumian simply smiled.
"I recall something you once said. Avoid seeing what I shouldn't, hearing what I shouldn't, and asking questions I shouldn't."
"..." Jenna glared at Lumian in frustration and refrained from further probing.
Lumian produced her compact revolver and tossed it to her.
Jenna caught it deftly and let out a chuckle.
"You didn't even dare to come up to me and return it in person?"
She smacked her lips and clicked her tongue.
"Is there something about me that frightens you?"
In that moment, she felt as if she had returned to teasing Lumian when they first met.

Lumian appraised her.
"You're quite audacious to enter a male stranger's room dressed like this in the middle of the night."
Jenna was dressed as she typically would for her evening performances. Her white blouse revealed a generous amount of her chest, and her off-white fluffy short skirt didn't provide much coverage as her legs spread on either side of the backrest.
Jenna deliberately covered her mouth and let out a soft chuckle.
"I was defenseless down in the underground, yet you didn't make a move, let alone now.
"Do you still hold onto your virginity? Need some help? A mature and beautiful sister can show you the wonders of the adult world."
As she spoke, she intentionally lowered her body, revealing her cleavage to Lumian.
Lumian didn't flinch and observed calmly.
Who would be frightened by such a thing?
Jenna's expectation of a fleeting gaze and a flushed expression from Lumian gradually transformed into discomfort.
She sat up straight and muttered, "Lame, coward..."
In the next instant, Lumian stood up abruptly.
Jenna's expression underwent a sudden change.
"What are you planning to do?"
Lumian's lips curled into a smirk as he turned toward the wooden table.
"Just pouring some light beer. Fancy a glass?"
Auberge du Coq Doré didn't offer the option of boiling water. The tenants either drank tap water or resorted to light beer as a substitute.
"...No, thanks." Jenna let out a relieved sigh.
Lumian took a few swigs of light beer and redirected the conversation.
"How can you be so certain that you're older than me?"
"I saw your wanted poster at Franca's. Well, hello there, Lumian. You're not even 18 yet, while I've already reached 21!" Jenna's satisfaction started to surface.
"Is your mental age only 12?" Lumian taunted before inquiring, "How did you come to know the infiltration route to that room?"
Franca had long harbored the desire to carry out an assassination against the Poison Spur Mob?
Jenna pursed her lips and replied, "I've been gathering intelligence for nearly a month, awaiting the perfect opportunity to assassinate Margot. But you beat me to it."
Margot had previously overseen the Salle de Gristmill.
"Do you hold a grudge against Margot?" Lumian asked.

"He didn't do anything to me." Jenna lowered her gaze slightly. "When I first arrived in the market district, searching for singing opportunities in various dance halls, I encountered another Showy Diva singer. She was a few years older than me and took me under her wing. She even helped refine my singing and guided me towards a chance to perform. Over a month ago, Margot violated her. F*cking dammit, did he think all Showy Divas were open for his taking? Afterwards, she left the market district. I later heard she was committed to an asylum...

"That was when I pleaded with Franca to obtain Beyonder powers and assist her."

Lumian fell silent for a few moments before speaking again.

"You see, one mustn't hesitate. When I made up my mind to kill Margot that morning, I carried out the deed that very night."

Jenna found herself both enraged and entertained.

"Well, everyone has their own style!"

Lumian changed the subject.

"Tomorrow morning, Baron Brignais will take me to meet the Boss. Do you have any insights on what kind of person he is?"

Jenna pondered for a moment before responding.

"I've never met him personally, but I've heard Franca mention a few things.

"He resides in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. He's a bit of a pervert and has a fondness for women, but he's not twisted. His tastes are quite f*cking normal, and every one of his partners matches Franca's preferences.

"He's a merchant by trade. He owns a depot near the steam locomotive station and holds significant shares in the nearby Rist docks. He also runs a freight company and a construction firm, providing employment opportunities for many Savoyards.

"You might not know this, but when the Poison Spur Mob first gained power, they had a major conflict with the Savoie Mob. All the laborers from the depot and the dock workers took to the streets. It was like a protest!"

A considerable number of people. If armed, they could form an army... Lumian motioned for Jenna to continue.

Jenna pulled her collar up slightly.

"Franca mentioned that he's quite amiable, even with common laborers. Don't be deceived by his appearance. His goal is to make others drop their guard around him.

He's cunning and highly intelligent. He enjoys playing mind games with others. Don't provoke him, or Franca won't be able to protect you.

"He wields significant power. It seems he's adept at fire

manipulation and possesses some mystical artifact."
Adept at fire manipulation... A Sequence 7 Pyromaniac of the Hunter pathway? No, Franca mentioned that he's incredibly powerful, and Franca is likely a Sequence 7 Witch of the Demoness pathway. If she made such an assessment, it's probable that the boss of the Savoie Mob is more than just a Sequence 7...
The Poison Spur Mob's "Black Scorpion" Roger is the boss with a boon equivalent to a Sequence 7. A Heretic Spellmaster might not necessarily defeat a Witch. Franca could easily be a mob boss herself, yet she willingly becomes this person's mistress. I wonder if she has ulterior motives or if his strength and background truly surpass Franca's? Lumian's thoughts raced as he analyzed the situation.
Jenna stood up.
"You better dress like a man tomorrow. Don't be like Baron Brignais. The Boss prefers aggressive subordinates who resemble wolfdogs."
"Is that so..." Lumian scoffed. "I'm afraid I'll appear overly aggressive."
Jenna rolled her eyes.
"That's right. You saved my life, yet there are times when I can't help but want to slap you!
"Anyway, don't go too far."
She reattached her holster to her calf and headed towards the door, yawning openly.
"I'm heading back now. Sigh, I won't be able to perform at the Salle de Gristmill for the time being.
"Why do you still live in such a lousy room?"
Although her own accommodations weren't great either, they were still much better than Auberge du Coq Doré.
Lumian smirked once again.
"This is my turf."
"Heh!" Jenna didn't say anything further. She entered the dimly lit corridor and vanished from sight.
Lumian freshened up and settled into bed. Thoughts of meeting the boss of the Savoie Mob the next day gradually lulled him into sleep.

Chapter 174: Reward

At half past ten in the morning on the following day, Baron Brignais rendezvoused with Lumian on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian had chosen a simple attire for the day, donning a linen shirt, a black waistcoat, and brown trousers. His cuffs were rolled up to his elbows, and he sported a wide-brimmed, brown hat.

This ensemble lent him an air of casualness, almost uncouth.

Baron Brignais observed it for a few moments but refrained from commenting. Instead, he merely reminded Lumian,

"Once we meet the Boss, it's best to keep your words to a minimum."

"Understood," Lumian replied, tipping his wide-brimmed hat.

Accompanied by Lumian alone, Baron Brignais did not bring Louis and the others. He led Lumian downstairs and directed him towards a four-seater carriage awaiting them at the entrance.

Within half an hour, the carriage navigated through Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative and halted on a comparably tranquil street.

The terrain in this area stood higher than its surroundings. Detached villas, predominantly white, beige, and grayish-blue, dotted the landscape. Each boasted a front lawn and a rear garden enclosed by barbed iron fences.

Lumian's gaze scanned the street signs, revealing the name Rue des Fontaines.

Following Baron Brignais, Lumian arrived at 11 Rue des Fontaines and watched as the baron pulled on the rope hanging beside the gated entrance.

Before long, a valet of Southern Continent origin approached and opened the iron gates.

"Monsieur Martin awaits you in his study," the dark-skinned valet remarked, his tone laced with arrogance.

Without waiting for Baron Brignais and Lumian's response, the valet turned on his heel and strolled along a cement path flanked by two green lawns spacious enough for three carriages.

After crossing the lawns, Lumian and Baron Brignais reached the grayish-white three-story villa.

The villa's door swung open, revealing a man in a black suit and a dark bow tie—typical butler attire—standing in the doorway.

Baron Brignais hastened his steps and greeted the man with a smile.

"Good morning, Faustino."

"Good morning, Brignais," Faustino, a man in his fifties, replied

with a smile.
Baron Brignais introduced him to Lumian, saying, "This is Monsieur Martin's butler, Monsieur Faustino."
Lumian greeted Faustino in the usual manner, maintaining proper decorum.
Faustino nodded and offered no further words. Leading them through a hallway adorned with a resplendent crystal chandelier, resembling a dance floor, he guided them into a room lined with bookshelves.
Along the way, Lumian surveyed his surroundings, noting an array of oil paintings and an assortment of weapons adorning the walls—single-handed swords, broadswords, hammers, spears, and short bows. The half-tall wooden platform that ought to have showcased vases and sculptures was instead occupied by silver-white suits of armor, stirrups, breastplates, and other items.
An enthusiast of cold weapons, Lumian thought, retracting his gaze before entering the study.
Behind the desk, positioned beside the floor-to-ceiling windows, stood a man who measured nearly 1.8 meters in height.
His hair, typical black as found in Intis, exhibited a few silver strands near his temples. He appeared to be in his early forties, possessed strong facial features, and his slightly reddened eyes contrasted with his otherwise brown irises.
The man possessed full cheeks that contrasted with his sharply defined features. Wrinkles were conspicuously absent from his countenance, and he exuded a relatively amiable temperament. He resembled a businessman who would effortlessly flash a smile before uttering a single word.
In that moment, he wore a white shirt and a formal black suit, devoid of a bow tie or necktie.
"Good morning, Monsieur Martin," Baron Brignais's expression turned respectful.
After Lumian offered his greetings, Gardner Martin smiled and let out a sigh.
"So young, aren't you?
"I'm beginning to understand Emperor Roselle's words: Heroes often exhibit a different demeanor from others when they are young. Should I address you as Lumian or Ciel?"
"Ciel," Lumian replied respectfully.
As Gardner Martin strolled away from the floor-to-ceiling windows, he offered warm praise,
"In just a week, you've slain two Sequence 8 Beyonders and gravely injured a Sequence 9. I couldn't have achieved such feats at your age. What's your Sequence?"

"Sequence 8, Provoker," Lumian responded candidly.
Gardner Martin expressed great satisfaction with Lumian's frankness. He nodded and remarked, "What I said earlier wasn't quite comprehensive. When I was a Sequence 8, I couldn't have accomplished what you did. Very well. Our Savoie Mob could use an exceptional lad like you."
Without waiting for Lumian's reply, he proceeded to ask, "Did you find anything noteworthy on 'Hammer' Ait?"
This person is aware of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation? Judging by his demeanor, even if he isn't aware of conservation, he believes that human Beyonders are akin to Beyonder creatures. They manifest Beyonder characteristics upon death, or some residual parts or ingredients that can be employed in potion brewing... Lumian contemplated for a moment and withheld nothing. From his pocket, he produced a fist-sized sphere resembling the morning clouds and the evening sun.
"I found this."
Gardner Martin regarded it with approval.
"Excellent. Sell it to me. It holds no value for you. How about 18,000 verl d'or?"
That's considerably higher than the 15,000 verl d'or at Mr. K's Gathering... Lumian pretended to be unaware of the exact price of the Beyonder characteristics.
"Is it truly worth 18,000 verl d'or?"
Baron Brignais, standing beside Lumian, couldn't fathom what peculiar object had prompted his boss to offer such a sum.
Something from 'Hammer' Ait? An ingredient employed for advancement? Or do Beyonders resemble Beyonder creatures? Baron Brignais entertained numerous speculations in an instant.
He suddenly regretted agreeing to surrender all of 'Hammer' Ait's possessions to Ciel the previous night in order to preserve his dignity.
"Haha," Gardner Martin boisterously chuckled. "It is indeed precious, but I'm offering a premium. Consider it your reward."
He then turned to Butler Faustino and instructed, "Go and fetch 18,000 in cash. Avoid denominations that are too large."
Lumian harbored no objections to selling the Pugilist Beyonder characteristic to Martin. He had intended to sell it at Mr. K's gathering.
His hope was to amass funds to acquire a mystical item capable of countering adverse effects, compensating for his lack of mysticism means or serving as a disguise.
Taking the Pugilist Beyonder characteristic from Ciel and toying with it for a few seconds, Gardner Martin addressed Baron

Brignais, "Despite Ciel's tender age, he has already rendered significant services to our Savoie Mob and possesses remarkable strength. It is time for him to assume more substantial responsibilities."
"Yes... You are already burdened with the usury business and the other shops on Avenue du Marché. It is no easy task. Get Ciel to assist you in managing Salle de Bal Brise. Allocate some personnel to support him, so he doesn't have to rely solely on himself."
Baron Brignais's facial muscles twitched ever so slightly. He suppressed his discontent and disappointment and replied, "Very well, Monsieur Martin."
Salle de Bal Brise was a veritable goldmine, and he was reluctant to let go of it.
If not for Monsieur Martin's direct order, he would have chosen to hand over the Avenue du Marché business to Ciel and suggested transferring some of the henchmen from "Giant" Simon and "Blood Palm" Black.
Lumian sensed the strain in his relationship with Baron Brignais. He couldn't deceive him as effortlessly as before.
There might even be clashes and conflicts in the future!
Gardner Martin turned to Lumian and instructed, "Take good care of Salle de Bal Brise. If you perform well, I will entrust you with more significant ventures."
"Thank you, Monsieur Martin," Lumian replied, lowering his head and feigning delight.
On the way back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Baron Brignais seemed to regain his composure. He engaged in occasional conversations with Lumian regarding the Savoie Mob, displaying politeness, courtesy, and refinement.
Lumian was more preoccupied with the small cloth bag brimming with 18,000 verl d'or.
With that sum, he could acquire a modest apartment in Quartier de l'Observatoire!
In the Darìège region, it was akin to owning a villa in a decent neighborhood.
Upon entering Salle de Bal Brise, Louis and the others approached Lumian.
Before they could speak, Baron Brignais drew from his mahogany pipe and announced,
"Louis, Sarkota, from this day forth, follow Ciel. He is now in charge of Salle de Bal Brise."
Louis, whose forehead bruises had mostly faded, and Sarkota, whose brownish-red hair exhibited slight natural curls, revealed expressions of shock and confusion.

They were aware that Ciel would be rewarded, but they never anticipated him taking over Salle de Bal Brise and themselves being assigned to him.
He was now a true leader of the Savoie Mob!
Ignoring his subordinates' reactions, Baron Brignais smiled at Lumian and stated, "Leave me an office on the second floor. I require it for the usury business."
"Very well," Lumian responded without objection.
After a brief handover, Baron Brignais led two thugs to address some trouble concerning the usury business. Lumian ascended to the second floor, intending to inquire about Salle de Bal Brise's operations.
Louis leaned in, speaking in a hushed tone. "Ciel, I mean, Boss, Red Boots is in your office. I wonder if she's here for you or the baron. Would you like to meet her?"
"Red Boots" Franca? Lumian nodded subtly.
"Where is my office?"
Louis hurriedly guided his new boss through the café and into the corridor on the second floor, reaching a room at the end.
"Right here." He indicated, pointing to the dark red wooden door.
Lumian nodded, grasped the handle, and pushed the door open.
The first thing that greeted his eyes were a pair of vibrant red boots, elegantly placed on a brown wooden desk.
Adorning the boots were a pair of off-white breeches, and higher still, a white blouse for ladies adorned with a multitude of embroidered flowers and vine-like patterns on the cuffs and collar. Over it, she wore a slender black and white checkered vest.
Continuing upward, Lumian's gaze fell upon a graceful, smooth neck, followed by lips painted a delicate shade of red. A sharp, refined nose, eyebrows that arched toward the temples, and eyes sparkling with a vibrant, cheerful lake-like hue completed the picture. Her long flaxen hair was artfully tied up in a high ponytail.
Seated upon a swivel chair that had once belonged to Baron Brignais, "Red Boots" Franca nonchalantly rested her feet on the edge of the desk, as if it were her own personal territory.

Chapter 175: Hidden Blade

Lumian stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him, the dark red wood closing off the outside world. He turned to Franca and asked, "Are you here to see the baron or me?"

Franca leaned back in the chair, stretching her body.

However, the swivel chair tilted slightly, leaving the ground and wobbling uncertainly.

"Care to guess why I'm here? For you or him?" Her voice cut through the air, clear and distinct, in stark contrast to her elegant appearance and demeanor. "Gardner initially wanted you to be Brignais's deputy, to see if you were capable of handling more than just fighting. I told him then that Brignais hasn't been very obedient lately."

Lumian nodded, a sudden realization dawning on him. Aurore was right. A comment made in bed could play a significant role...

His confusion from earlier, on Rue des Fontaines, began to dissipate. How could the boss be so generous as to take away one of Baron Brignais's most prized "property" and hand it over to an outsider like him?

Salle de Bal Brise was the most popular dance hall in the entire market district!

Initially, Lumian had contemplated mocking Franca's masculine sitting posture, but the thought of her true gender made him reconsider. He clicked his tongue and remarked, "So, I should be thanking you?"

"No need for that. After all, you saved Jenna," Franca replied, smiling as she shook her right foot on her left ankle. "I came here for two reasons. First, I wanted to assure you that I understand the distinction between kindness and animosity. I will surely repay kindness. Second, I wanted to warn you not to harbor any intentions toward Jenna."

The latter half of her sentence carried a clear warning that she would seek revenge for any offense.

Lumian couldn't help but chuckle.

"Are you lacking confidence? If you manage to make Jenna infatuated with you, nothing I do will change her feelings."

Had Lumian not known about the potential gender transformation through the Demoness pathway, he might have taunted Franca, asking if her confidence solely relied on her dick. He might have mocked her insecurity and her need to caution an unrelated individual. *What did she think Jenna was?* Someone who would easily change her heart? Lumian could almost visualize Jenna treating Franca as a friend rather than a lover.

Gradually, Franca's smile faded. She withdrew her feet and rose from her chair.
Despite being slightly shorter than Lumian, she stood at an impressive height of almost 1.75 meters, a rarity among Intisian women.
Franca circled the desk, drawing closer to Lumian. A smirk formed on her lips as she said, "If you're in need of women, I can introduce you to some of my top dancers. And if they don't catch your fancy, how about me?"
As she spoke, she gently hooked her hand around Lumian's chin, lowering it slowly.
Lumian's heart remained calm, undisturbed like a still lake. The realization that this woman may have once been a man had extinguished any desire within him. He simply resisted, firmly gripping Franca's right hand and offering a smile.
"I'm afraid the boss would have me sleeping with the fishes at the bottom of the Srenzo River."
Changing the topic, Lumian continued, "So, you swing both ways? Men and women?"
Franca withdrew her hand, straightened up, and offered a smile.
"I used to fancy girls exclusively, but after giving it a try with a man, I realized it's not half bad. It brings about a different sensation.
"Life's too short to impose limits upon oneself. Break free from unnecessary restrictions and explore. You'll have more fun and live a truly different life."
It seems as if Franca had indeed been a man in the past. *Is she now a Sequence 7 Witch?* And why did her last sentence sound so familiar? In the midst of his pondering, Lumian responded to Franca,
"I don't hold any special feelings for Jenna, nor do I intend to. I have far more pressing matters to attend to."
"Very well." Franca strode toward the door.
Just as her hand reached for the handle, Lumian's memory was suddenly jogged, and he finally recalled the source of Franca's words.
It had been mentioned by Aurore in his dream!
She spoke of a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who had contemplated the idea of becoming an Assassin and had consumed the corresponding potion. However, at the Witch Sequence, he found himself in a quandary, unsure whether to undergo a gender transformation. Another member of the society had advised him, saying, "Life is short, why not give it a try?""

It was the very essence of what Franca had condensed into those words!
Lumian's heart stirred as he gazed upon Franca's graceful figure. He spoke in a deep, resonant voice, "Life is short, why not give it a try?"
Franca's hand froze on the doorknob, and she stood there, as if struck by lightning.
After a few seconds, she spun around, locking her gaze with Lumian's, her voice tinged with anxiety.
"Who are you? What's your code name?"
This reaction... It appears my guess was correct! Lumian felt a surge of delight followed by a sinking feeling in his heart.
"I'm Muggle's brother."
Upon hearing Ciel accurately mention the code name of one of the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Franca breathed a sigh of relief and said,
"I'm not sure if your sister mentioned me, but my code name is Hidden Blade. I belong to the same secret organization as her. No, she must have mentioned me! Otherwise, you wouldn't be familiar with that phrase. Damn it all, what the hell is happening!"
Lumian shut his eyes and spoke with a resolute tone, "She never mentioned your code name or identity because I chose the Hunter pathway. When she reminded me about the neighboring Demoness pathway and its potential for gender transformation, she used your experience as an example."
"So, you do know..." Franca felt a strong urge to disappear into the depths of the sewers.
Despite having adapted to her current form and overcoming her self-imposed limitations, her newfound enjoyment with men was contingent upon her previous gender remaining a secret.
The notion that Ciel knew about her past as a man, and her penchant for intimate relations with men, ignited a dangerous thought within her.
The dead can keep secrets... The dead will forget... The dead won't mock me...
After a few seconds, Franca let out a slow exhale and said, "It would be wise for you to forget this. If you weren't Muggle's brother, I would have ensured your permanent disappearance."
At that moment, she projected her true, masculine side, casting her gaze toward the future.
"Let me enlighten you about the Hunter pathway. It, too, involves a gender change. I paid a steep price to acquire this knowledge. Unlike Demonesses, Hunters transition from women to men. It likely occurs at Sequence 4. When the time comes, I will switch

paths, become a Hunter, and reclaim my male form!"
Is that so... Hunters symbolize males, while Demonesses represent females? No wonder they are neighboring paths... Lumian restrained his emotions and let out a chuckle.
"When that time arrives, how will you face the men you were once intimately involved with?"
Franca's expression turned smug as she unveiled her well-devised plan.
"I will administer them the Witch potion. If they are Beyonders unable to transition to the Demoness pathway, I will find a way to transform the characteristics of a Witch Bounded characteristic into mystical items for them to wear. And then, when the time is ripe, hehe..."
Madame, you're somewhat deranged... Lumian dared not further provoke the Red Boots.
This individual seemed capable of anything!
As he expected, Franca issued a threat, "I'll emphasize once again, it's in your best interest to forget about this matter and refrain from harboring any intentions toward Jenna. Otherwise, I will apprehend you and force the Witch potion down your throat! Though Sequence 7 may not grant the ability to switch pathways, it does make one even more dangerous. It might not result in half-crazed madness or loss of control."
Visualizing such a scenario, Lumian hastened to nod and made a solemn pledge, "You are my sister's friend. I will surely keep your secret."
Franca relaxed and inquired about Muggle, "Where is Muggle? Is she also in Trier? Is she strikingly beautiful in reality?"
Lumian fell into silence. After a few seconds, he spoke in a hoarse voice, "She passed away. You must have seen the wanted posters. In that calamity, she..."
Franca parted her lips, but no words escaped them.
She returned to Lumian's side and gently patted his shoulder, offering solace.
After a moment, Franca dabbed at the corners of her eyes and spoke, "Ever since I became a woman, it seems my tear ducts have become more active... I can't fathom that Muggle departed from us so suddenly. Whenever we gathered, she exuded gentleness, brilliance, humor, and kindness. Though I've never laid eyes on her true form, I believe she must be incredibly beautiful..."
With a regained composure, Lumian gazed at Franca and said, "Madame Hidden Blade, I request that you keep this matter under wraps for the time being. Do not divulge it to other members of your organization. It could impact my investigation into the truth

behind the catastrophe."
In a slightly nasal tone, Franca replied, "No problem."
Lumian observed Franca's shimmering eyes resembling tranquil lakes and contemplated before posing his next question, "How many encounters did you have with my sister over the past year?"
"Only once. Why do you ask?" Franca inquired, puzzled.
Lumian continued, "Did she exhibit any peculiar behavior or interact with any unusual individuals?"
"No," Franca shook her head. "It was a regular gathering where we exchanged knowledge of mysticism and traded items. We belong to different factions—she's part of the Academy, and I am affiliated with the Sanctuary. Our gatherings rarely coincide."
Lumian refrained from further inquiries. Seeking to gain something from the situation, he spoke with a mindset of extracting information, "Madame Hidden Blade, I am currently studying the grimoire left behind by my sister, but there are numerous sections that elude my understanding. Might I seek your guidance?"
"Certainly," Franca disclosed her address. "I reside in the penthouse at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Room 601. You can find me during Jenna's performances. Every evening, unless I am at Rue des Fontaines or visiting various dance halls, I will be at home. Also, please refrain from using my code name. Just refer to me as Franca."
Why does it feel like we're engaged in a clandestine affair behind Jenna's back... Lumian criticized inwardly, feeling perplexed. He voiced his puzzlement, "Franca, you possess the backing of that secret organization, and you are not lacking in strength yourself. Why did you join the mob?"
Franca grinned and playfully winked her left eye. "Secret."

Chapter 176: Property

After bidding farewell to Franca, Lumian led Louis and Sarkota back to the café and settled himself into Baron Brignais's usual spot.

Already awaiting him was René, the manager of Salle de Bal Brise.

In his forties, René had a gaunt face, leaving one to wonder if he was overworked or simply born that way. His light-yellow hairline was receding in a manner similar to the people from Loen.

Despite being an executive directly appointed by Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob, René treated Lumian with utmost respect and wore an ingratiating smile.

"Monsieur Ciel, would you care to learn more about the dance hall?"

"Very well." Lumian reached out to take the stack of reports from René and perused them with unwavering focus.

Standing behind him, Louis and Sarkota couldn't help but feel like they hardly knew their leader at all once more.

Lumian, a young man hailing from the countryside, possessed an understanding of complex financial statements that was far beyond their comprehension.

They would have been left feeling dizzy and yearning for sleep had they been tasked with such a feat.

Can this man both fight and possess a cultured mind? Louis diverted his gaze from the reports, which seemed to possess some kind of "supernatural effect."

René seized the opportunity to acquaint Lumian with the workings of Salle de Bal Brise.

"On weekdays, we earn a daily income ranging from 1,200 to 1,800 verl d'or. On weekends, that figure can reach as high as 5,000 verl d'or. Typically, it hovers around 4,000...

"Last year, our total income amounted to 645,425 verl d'or and 37 coppet. This year, there has been a slight increase based on current trends, but nothing significant...

"We require 12 bouncers, 4 bartenders, 6 waiters, 3 chefs, 6 kitchen helpers, 3 handymen, 3 dishwashers, 4 cleaners, 1 waiter supervisor, 3 finance staff, 3 alcohol and food procurers, and a carriage driver... Their average annual salary is 1,000 verl d'or. We also provide them with complimentary lunch and dinner, which costs us a total of 53,000 verl d'or.

"As the manager, my annual salary, along with the year-end dividend, amounts to about 7,000 verl d'or.

"As per our agreement with Red Boots, each dancer receives a base salary of 1 verl d'or per day... When they strike a deal with a guest,

we take 30%... Transactions usually occur in the rooms on the upper two floors of the dance hall. If they wish to leave, they must settle the fee with the bouncer or the waiter supervisor at the door in advance...
"Wine, champagne, beer, brandy, sugar alcohol, absinthe, and various flavors of soda, along with ice and other ingredients, cost us approximately 120,000 verl d'or per year...
"We've already purchased this establishment, so there's no additional rent to be paid...
"When coupled with expenses for horse care, venue maintenance, gas, tap water, singers, and the band, our annual costs sum up to around 230,000 verl d'or...
"Out of the remaining 310,000 verl d'or, the Boss will claim 100,000 verl d'or. We'll also need 100,000 verl d'or to establish a favorable relationship with the officers at the police headquarters. Monsieur Ciel, you're left with approximately 110,000 verl d'or. This needs to cover your personal expenses, firearm and ammunition supplies, rewards for your subordinates, as well as compensation for the victims and the injured...
"Sadly, the income of the people in the market district isn't particularly high; otherwise, we could generate more revenue from alcohol and beverages..."
As Lumian absorbed the details from the report and listened attentively to René's explanations, a clearer picture of Salle de Bal Brise's situation formed in his mind.
Inwardly, he couldn't help but let out a sigh.
A mob leader with a profitable enterprise certainly rakes in substantial wealth!
According to newspapers, magazines, and the information collected by his sister Aurore, the annual salary of a minister in Intis amounted to a mere 100,000 verl d'or. Although the government provided free housing, basic household items, silverware, and two private carriages, expenses for personal servants and banquets fell on their own pockets.
Of course, Lumian had to reward his subordinates on occasion and allocate funds for compensations and ammunition in case of conflicts. However, there was no need for extravagant living, hiring servants, or hosting lavish banquets.
All in all, he earned a sum similar to that of a minister.
The only difference was that ministers didn't rely solely on their public salaries for income.
On the other hand, laborers received an annual salary of around 700 verl d'or, while maids earned approximately 480 verl d'or. Construction workers fared only slightly better, with an annual

salary of 1,000 verl d'or. Skilled workers brought in a meager 2,500 verl d'or per year, while senior engineers ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 verl d'or annually.
Indeed, the "shortcut" to wealth is written within the laws themselves... No wonder Brignais couldn't bear to let go of this dance hall... Lumian recollected a comment his sister had made.
By saving money and taking care of his subordinates, preventing them from recklessly rushing into battles, he had enough left over each year to purchase a Sequence 6 potion formula and even the corresponding primary ingredients!
Once René finished speaking, Lumian nodded and posed a question, "Why provide the dancers with a base salary?"
It wasn't that he was reluctant to part with the funds, but rather out of curiosity.
"The dancers under our Savoie Mob are under the control of Red Boots. She insists on a base salary, allowing the dancers to opt-out of additional jobs. If they wish to earn less, they earn less. If they choose to starve, they starve," René explained. "Apart from Red Boots's dancers, there are also women who are controlled by figures from the usury business. In the past, Baron Brignais had authority over them all, so there wasn't any conflict. How should we coordinate matters now?"
Thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, leading him to notice the resemblances between Franca and his sister Aurore.
Could it be because they are part of the same secret organization? However, if it were Aurore, she would have approached it differently. She would have organized protests among the dancers, established an underground school to educate them, and sought alternative paths... If it were me, what would I do? After pondering for a moment, Lumian raised his gaze and addressed René, Louis, and the others.
"For now, let us maintain the current state of affairs. René, assist me in dealing with the police officers during this period. Once I acquaint myself better with our surroundings, I shall engage in fruitful discussions with them."
...
After altering the passwords of the two mechanical safes and informing Manager René of one as per the established protocol, Lumian made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré before lunchtime.
He proceeded directly to the fifth floor and rapped on Charlie's door.
Charlie, who was enjoying a light beer with a nibble of baguette, caught sight of Ciel as soon as he opened the door.

He exclaimed happily, "Where have you been these past couple of days? You didn't even show up at the bar for a drink."
Lumian inquired, "There's a job opportunity. Would you be interested?"
"What kind of job?" Charlie worriedly contemplated his diminishing savings and the bleak prospects of finding new employment.
With a smile, Lumian responded, "How about working as a waiter at Salle de Bal Brise? You don't have to join the Savoie Mob. You'll earn 70 verl d'or per month. You can keep the tips, but be aware that folks in the market district aren't inclined to tip unless you become a woman and are willing to engage with them intimately. Yes, there are also female patrons who seek out waiters for such purposes. You're experienced in that domain, so there's no need for further elaboration."
"Salle de Bal Brise?" Charlie's eyes widened. "Have you already gained Baron Brignais's trust?"
To be able to arrange for someone to work as a waiter at Salle de Bal Brise without joining the Savoie Mob!
Lumian simply maintained his smile.
"I don't need Baron Brignais's approval. Salle de Bal Brise is now under me."
"Huh?" Charlie questioned his own hearing.
Lumian clarified, still smiling, "After I eliminated 'Hammer' Ait, the Savoie Mob's leader handed over Salle de Bal Brise to me."
"Is that so?" Charlie had an epiphany before blurting out in astonishment, "You took down 'Hammer' Ait as well?"
Lumian nodded. "Don't disclose this to anyone. I fear the police might come knocking."
"..." Charlie was at a loss for words.
After a few seconds, he mumbled, "Perhaps those Poison Spur Mob fellows should pay a visit to the nearby cathedral and pray, see if their luck can change. Ever since you arrived in the market district, their leaders have been dropping like flies. I can't fathom how they must be feeling now."
"Great idea," Lumian commended.
If the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob had the audacity to pray in the Eternal Blazing Sun or the cathedral of the God of Steam and Machinery, the mob would cease to exist.
Of course, Lumian didn't want them to act so foolishly before Louis Lund visited again.
Charlie pondered for a moment and responded, "Alright, I'll head over to Salle de Bal Brise in the afternoon. Who should I ask for? Haha, I rarely get to visit the dance hall because I'm always short

on cash. Now I can go there every day."
"Just find Manager René and let him know you're a tenant at Auberge du Coq Doré," Lumian replied simply, his gaze shifting to the side.
There were two cleaning ladies nearby. One of them appeared to be in her early fifties, but upon closer inspection, one would think she was only in her forties. She had originally possessed flaxen-colored hair, but she now wore a vibrant blond wig and had applied eye shadow and makeup. This concealed her fine wrinkles to some extent, but couldn't entirely hide her weariness.
"Who are they?" Lumian inquired of Charlie.
Charlie clicked his tongue and explained, "Don't you know? Our penny-pinching landlord has changed his ways. He no longer hires someone to clean just once a week. Now he's opted to have two cleaning ladies work every morning.
"Tell me, tell me, isn't this a miraculous turn of events? It's only slightly less fortunate than my own stroke of luck back then!"
Lumian, having just finished perusing Salle de Bal Brise's financial statements, immediately considered the salary of a cleaning lady.
Around 70 to 80 verl d'or per month.
However, that was for full-time work. This kind of half-day job would cost at most 45 verl d'or.
"Two cleaning ladies working half a day wouldn't exceed 100 verl d'or per month. Hiring someone for regular cleaning once a week costs 18 verl d'or each time. And Monsieur Ive promised to increase it to twice a week. In other words, it'll cost 150 verl d'or per month.
"How is this generous? It's simply meticulous budgeting!" Lumian scoffed.
He suspected that if it weren't for the fact that a cleaning lady couldn't finish the entire motel in half a day, no one would take on such a job. Monsieur Ive definitely wouldn't hire two.
"Is that so?" Charlie scratched his head.
His computational abilities couldn't keep up with Lumian's rapid deductions.
As the two cleaning ladies entered a vacant room to rid it of bedbugs, Lumian subtly gestured in their direction with his chin.
"Why is one of them wearing a wig and eye shadow?"
What kind of cleaning lady does that?
Charlie lowered his voice and said, "I asked about that. Her name is Elodie. She claims to have been a theater actress and says she's used to dollying herself up like that. And she continues to do so to this day.
"No one knows if she's telling the truth. When I worked as an attendant at Hôtel du Cygne Blanc, I heard from the kitchen staff

that when aging prostitutes are scorned, their only option is to take on tasks like dishwashing and cleaning..."

Lumian recollected Elodie's appearance and surmised that she must have been quite a beauty in her youth. Whether she had been a theater actress or a woman of the streets had no bearing on her current role as a cleaning lady.

After bidding farewell to Charlie, Lumian made his way to the restaurant on the first floor for a quick meal before taking a public carriage to Avenue du Boulevard.

He intended to inform Mr. K that the mission had been successfully accomplished!

Chapter 177: Proselytizing

Before stepping onto the public carriage, Lumian made a special effort to spend six licks on purchasing a copy of the Psychic magazine, disguising himself as someone attending a gathering of mysticism enthusiasts at 19 Rue Scheer.

He worried that Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob, might secretly tail him to ascertain if something was amiss.

While he could employ some anti-tracking methods to try and shake off potential pursuers, wouldn't that raise more suspicion?

In comparison, it would be more convincing to pose as a naive country bumpkin who had recently arrived in Trier and stumbled upon the Beyonder path. Such an individual would naturally crave knowledge about mysticism, leading to the purchase of Psychic and other magazines. Occasionally attending various gatherings of mysticism enthusiasts would solidify the facade.

In truth, this tale held some merit.

The only hitch was that Mr. K, the organizer of the mysticism enthusiast gathering, had a secret organization backing him.

If Gardner Martin's men had indeed delved into their investigation, Lumian would let them confront Mr. K and witness the clash of strengths!

As the Prankster King of Cordu, Lumian always relished witnessing a spectacle unfold.

When the time arrived, he would adjust his choices based on the outcome of the battle. In any case, his overall direction would remain unchanged. He would follow the instructions of Madam Magician and infiltrate the secret organization behind Mr. K.

Inside the carriage, Lumian flipped through Psychic.

The current issue focused on the theme of "secret deeds."

Contrary to Lumian's initial instinctive interpretation, the term "deed" in the context of secret deeds did not refer to an actual "deed" but rather denoted "compatibility." It represented a method of merging one's mind with a specific hidden entity, enabling the acquisition of corresponding mental experiences and a certain amount of mystical knowledge.

Psychic's editorials stressed that this act was exceedingly perilous. Unless one could verify the trustworthiness and absence of malice in the subject of the secret deed, attempting it was strongly discouraged. It would lead to dire and severe consequences, including but not limited to mental illness, possession by evil spirits, loss of rationality, sudden death, and alterations in personality.

Ah, now it makes sense... Lumian immediately grasped some of

the contents of Aurore's grimoire.
Initially, he had struggled to comprehend those passages, viewing them through the lens of a contract. However, with a change in perspective, he now roughly understood their meaning.
Lumian lowered his gaze to the Psychic magazine in his hand and silently commended it, saying,
It's more useful than I anticipated. I had thought it was all concocted to deceive enthusiasts of mysticism.
Yes, although there are numerous errors in common sense that suggest it wasn't written by someone who truly ventured into the Beyonder world and conducted extensive research, their explanations of certain concepts are rather advanced. They come close to the correct answer, and some even enlighten me...
Amidst his praise, he muttered, Considering that Mr. K resides beneath the headquarters of Psychic, could there truly be Beyonders among the editorial staff and contributing authors of these mysticism magazines?
Did they intentionally write an accurate article first and then deliberately alter many concepts and common knowledge to something incorrect?
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian inwardly hissed.
From this vantage point, the editors of this issue aren't instructing the correct secret deed ritual. Instead, they are cautioning those who attempt secret deeds without discretion!
No, it's not merely without discretion. It's more plausible that it was purposefully guided by someone with malicious intentions...
How many incidents involving secret deeds have occurred?
At that moment, Lumian revisited Psychic, no longer focusing on the specific words.
He even sensed that it was brimming with warnings written in blood-red ink: "Cease! Refrain from engaging in any further secret deed rituals!"
The mysterious world is truly fraught with peril... Lumian closed his eyes and sighed deeply, touched by emotions.
The longer he immersed himself in the field of mysticism, the more he comprehended his sister's helplessness and struggle.
He closed Psychic, a magazine two licks cheaper than the average, and directed his gaze out of the carriage window.
Upon reaching Rue Scheer in Avenue du Boulevard, Lumian executed his customary anti-tracking measures, showcasing his Hunter instincts.
He then entered Psychic's headquarters and knocked on the door of Room 103 using the distinctive pattern of three-long, two-short,

and one-long knock.
As before, he was led to the basement and encountered Mr. K.
Mr. K still wore a voluminous black robe with an oversized hood, rendering his face concealed within shadows.
Seated in the crimson-backed chair, he gazed at Lumian for a few seconds before speaking in a low, raspy voice, "What brings you here this time?"
"Mr. K, I have fulfilled the mission you assigned me and have become a leader in the Savoie Mob of the market district. I now oversee Salle de Bal Brise and Auberge du Coq Doré," Lumian said with a smile.
Mr. K offered a slight nod.
"Excellent. I like your way of doing things.
"What you must do next is earn Gardner Martin's trust and secure his genuine recognition."
This time, Mr. K omitted the words "reward" or "mission." Instead, he issued a direct command, treating Lumian as if he were already his subordinate.
Earning the Boss's trust? Lumian was momentarily taken aback, followed by intense bewilderment and unease.
He recalled vividly that when Mr. K assigned the mission, he hadn't specified joining the Savoie Mob. He had used the word "any"!
Yet now, the subsequent task was to be truly acknowledged by the boss of the Savoie Mob!
If I hadn't chosen Baron Brignais and chose another mob, what kind of mission would Mr. K have assigned me today?
Or was he utterly convinced that I would join the Savoie Mob?
What makes him so certain?
Thoughts swirled in Lumian's mind, reminding him of recent events.
Baron Brignais dispatched me to handle a leader from the Poison Spur Mob after I eliminated the pervert and obtained the canister of sedatives, putting it to good use...
Isn't this too much of a coincidence?
There are other similar occurrences...
Every so often, I sense someone's gaze upon me from the shadows nearby, yet I perceive nothing...
Could all of this have been orchestrated by Mr. K?
If I had not chosen the Savoie Mob, would I have been "arranged" to join the Savoie Mob following a series of incidents?
The more Lumian pondered, the more a sense of dread overcame him.
When Lumian looked at Mr. K again, the notion of treating him as

a cash cow vanished from his mind.
Perhaps, apart from Madam Magician and a few others, this might be the most powerful Beyonder he had ever encountered!
Unknowingly, it compelled him to comply with the other party's desires!
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian lowered his head and said, "Yes, Mr. K."
He assumed the demeanor of a subordinate.
Meanwhile, he couldn't help but think of "Red Boots" Franca.
This member of the secret organization, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, possessed both a background and strength, yet she aspired to become the mistress of a mob boss. Clearly, she harbored ulterior motives.
Is her objective also to get close to Gardner Martin? Is she involved in something significant or a crucial secret? Lumian attempted to make an educated guess.
Mr. K nodded in satisfaction.
"I'm pleased to see you know your place. Don't worry, I won't be stingy with the rewards.
"Have you not prayed in any cathedral recently?"
He changed the subject.
"I'm a wanted criminal!" Lumian recalled Madam Magician's warning and retorted angrily, "Besides, those deities won't save us at all!"
Mr. K chuckled.
"It's not that they won't, but they can't. Their power cannot envelop all believers and assist everyone during times of calamity.
"There are numerous reasons, but to put it succinctly, there is only one:
"Weakness is an inherent sin.
"Are you curious about the Lord I believe in? He embodies the truth of this world. He is supreme. His divine grace flows abundantly like the sea. He created everything and shall annihilate everything. He is power incarnate, as are we."
Observing Lumian's silence, Mr. K didn't press further.
"You need not answer me now. Ponder carefully during this period. Reflect on who can save us and offer protection in this increasingly perilous and deranged world.
"Once you have affirmed your faith in Him, you will genuinely become one of us. It won't be long before your strength significantly improves."
"I shall consider it deeply," Lumian replied in a hushed tone.
Mr. K then inquired, "Is there anything else?"
Having adjusted his mindset, Lumian asked, with the intention of

not missing out on anything by asking,"In the course of fulfilling the mission, if I encounter danger, may I employ your finger? How should I utilize it?"
Mr. K nodded and responded, "Just take it out."
In other words, it could be employed.
"If I use it, how should I deal with the threat from Susanna Mattise in the future?" Lumian probed further.
Mr. K fell silent for a few seconds.
"After you employ that finger, return to me here. I shall provide you with another one."
Indeed, your fingers are consumables... Lumian pondered for a moment and said, "I sold 'Hammer' Ait's Beyonder characteristic to Gardner Martin for 18,000 verl d'or. I wish to purchase a Sealed Artifact that can enhance my mystical abilities or aid me in better disguising myself. Do you have any such items here, Mr. K?"
Mr. K didn't offer an immediate response, as if he were contemplating a suitable candidate.
After a while, he said to Lumian, "Come here and make your selection on Saturday night."
Lumian beamed.
"Thank you, Mr. K."
It felt reassuring to have the support of an organization, even if he was only an unofficial member.
...
After arriving at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Lumian carefully stowed Mr. K's finger in Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré. His next destination was Salle de Bal Brise, where he intended to locate an unoccupied room. There, he would summon the messenger of Madam Magician to relay the progress of his mission. Lumian hoped to receive valuable feedback from her, particularly regarding how Mr. K had permitted these events to unfold with an uncanny degree of coincidence.

Chapter 178: The Messenger's Response

Evening, Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian made his way to the entrance. Just as he reached the door, he was greeted by two mobsters standing guard.

"Good evening, Boss."

Lumian, still donned in a crisp white shirt, a black vest, and rolled-up cuffs, acknowledged them with a smile and a nod.

Louis and Sarkota had been eagerly awaiting the return of their new leader. Spotting Lumian entering the dance hall, they swiftly abandoned their positions at the bar counter and forced smiles on their faces.

"Boss, why don't you let us accompany you? It's not safe to be unprotected like this!" Louis expressed his loyalty with concern.

Lumian chuckled in amusement and replied, "You two? Protecting me?"

"I worry that if anything were to happen, you both would end up beaten to a pulp. I'd have to compensate your loved ones."

Louis smiled sheepishly.

"I know you're formidable, Boss, and you can handle 'Hammer' Ait and 'Wolf' Margot on your own. But isn't there a saying that goes, 'Two fists can't fight four hands'? Besides, we all carry guns, and our aim isn't too shabby."

Two fists can't fight four hands? Lumian thought to himself. Wasn't that something Emperor Roselle once said? When did it become a saying? Aurore had always suspected that many vulgarities originated from Emperor Roselle, but nobody had ever confirmed it... Lumian glanced at Louis, who appeared tough but had a submissive demeanor, and Sarkota, with his curly brown hair and full lips. He nodded slightly and responded, "When I instruct you to follow, you may do so. When I don't, keep an eye on the dance hall. If anyone dares to cause trouble, shoot them."

"Right, where can I find a shooting range?"

"There's one in the basement of the dance hall," Louis pointed downwards, indicating his feet. "The other leaders also come there to practice their shooting skills, but they have to bring their own ammunition."

"Excellent." Lumian nodded in satisfaction.

He urgently needed to improve his marksmanship, as he lacked effective long-range attacks.

Louis asked again, "Boss, the environment at Auberge du Coq Doré is dreadful. Are you planning to relocate to the dance hall? There are several rooms on the second floor for you to choose from. Or do you intend to stay in the temporary rest area previously used by

Baron Brignais?"
Louis displayed his willingness, recognizing that both he and Sarkota had once been trusted aides of Baron Brignais. If they failed to earn the trust of the new leader, they might be relegated to mere bouncers at the entrance. Their status would plummet, and they would be at the mercy of the members of the Savoie Mob, with whom they had never gotten along. Not only would their income suffer, but they would also face significant bullying.
Lumian pondered for a moment before responding, "Show me the rooms."
This location was ideal for the ritual to summon Madam Magician's messenger.
Lumian had no plans to check out of Auberge du Coq Doré anytime soon. His strategy involved selecting a room on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise and Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré as his nightly resting places after dismissing Louis and Sarkota. This increased his chances of being attacked under the cover of darkness. Occasionally, he would also consider his rented safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Lumian sensed that the Poison Spur Mob wouldn't let him off easily. He had eliminated three leaders consecutively and had deliberately provoked them. Once the authorities let their guard down a little, the likelihood of retaliation would be high. Lumian was confident that the other side had been provoked, as his potion had been further digested. In another month or two, he might even consider advancing to Pyromaniac.
Lumian didn't worry too much about being secretly attacked by "Black Scorpion" Roger and the other leaders of the Poison Spur Mob. With Mr. K's finger, he stood a good chance of defending himself, even against Susanna Mattise, who was equivalent to a Sequence 5 Beyonder, let alone "Black Scorpion" Roger and the others who had not yet become Sowers.
His concern lay in the possibility that if a fight were to break out, Mr. K might lose control and end up killing "Black Scorpion" Roger. If that happened, Louis Lund would disappear and the trail of clues would come to an abrupt end.
Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian made his way through the café and entered the corridor. After scanning the area, he pointed to a room closer to his office and declared, "I'll take this one."
The room boasted classical furniture, a four-piece set of dark red velvet, and a cushioned recliner.
"Boss, should we replace these fabric items with new ones?" Louis ingratiatingly inquired.
Sarkota, ever quiet in comparison, stood by his side.

"No need," Lumian replied, finding an excuse. He then assigned his two bodyguards to watch over the door leading from the café to the second-floor corridor. Locking the door, he settled himself at a wide wooden table near the window to write a letter to Madam Magician.

In the letter, he emphasized that he had completed Mr. K's mission and earned his trust, even undergoing proselytization. He mentioned the opportunity to join the secret organization supporting Mr. K and inquired about the necessity of praying to Mr. K's lord, as well as the potential consequences of being monitored by that entity. Finally, he highlighted his recent actions and expressed his unease over certain coincidences.

Once he neatly folded the letter, Lumian arranged the altar and conjured a wall of spirituality.

With the summoning ritual completed, he fixed his gaze upon the blue flame of the candle and waited in the chilling and eerie environment.

Before long, a doll-like figure, the size of an arm, materialized above the fire.

Clad in a delicate golden dress, the figure surveyed the area with unfocused, light-blue eyes. Raising its right hand, it delicately pinched its petite, pale-white nose.

"It stinks! It stinks! This place isn't as clean as the last one!"

"Isn't this place supposed to be clean?" Lumian exclaimed, scanning his surroundings in surprise. "There are no bedbugs, and it's just been cleaned."

The messenger continued to wrinkle its nose, its voice ethereal and illusory as it spoke.

"There are old bones buried beneath the ground!

"They're foul, putrid, and repulsive!"

With those words, the blond "doll" snatched the letter and vanished instantly.

Clearly, it had no intention of staying a moment longer!

Old bones underground? Lumian repeated the messenger's words, perplexed.

He remembered that Salle de Bal Brise had been erected upon a cemetery belonging to a cathedral, and the bodies and ashes had been relocated to the catacombs.

Even after the Savoie Mob had acquired the building, there remained an eerie atmosphere. Concerned that some bones might have been left behind deep beneath the ground, they had commissioned a spherical statue crafted from white skulls and placed it at the entrance, accompanied by an engraved inscription.

The messenger's reaction hinted that there truly were ancient

remains interred underground.
When the cathedral had moved the remains and ashes from the original cemetery to the catacombs, they likely hadn't intentionally left anything behind, unless they had failed to discover it or were unaware... Could it be that there is a hidden tomb beneath the original cemetery, dating back to the Fourth Epoch? *Is that why the messenger reacted so strongly?* Well, for now, let's set aside the matter of the old bones underground. After all, nothing untoward has occurred at Salle de Bal Brise throughout these years. It's highly unlikely that anything would go awry the moment I set foot here, right? Lumian mused, concluding the ritual and tidying up the altar.
He settled into the cushioned recliner, gently rocking back and forth, awaiting Madam Magician's response.
Time passed, and the sky darkened completely. Lumian contemplated whether he should have Louis and the others bring dinner to his room or indulge in it at the café or the bar counter.
Suddenly, a stack of papers fell from above, landing on his lap.
This time, the "doll" messenger didn't even reveal itself, clearly displaying its profound aversion to the overall "environment" of Salle de Bal Brise.
In the future, I'll summon it at Auberge du Coq Doré or that safe house... Lumian unfolded the letter and read it attentively.
"Excellent job. It seems you have gained Mr. K's admiration and initial approval.
"From now on, simply follow his instructions. When the need arises, I will inform you of the true objective in advance.
"You can pretend to believe in the entity mentioned by Mr. K. After all, you already bear traces of two entities. Adding another one won't be an issue. I'm just concerned it might get a bit crowded.
"Haha, the previous statement was a jest. The real solution is as follows:
"You can feign belief, but whenever you meet Mr. K and engage in prayer, beseech my lord for the protection of an angel. You should have learned the corresponding ritualistic magic, correct? If not, consult your sister's grimoires.
"Usually, refrain from invoking the honorific name of that individual, even if the order has been disrupted. Unless you are certain you have received the angel's protection.
"I understand that the more one tries to suppress certain memories, the more they tend to resurface. During your next therapy session, you can attempt seeking assistance from your psychiatrist. In other words, you must postpone the matter of becoming a false believer until after the upcoming treatment.

"As for coincidences, they often have multiple factors intertwined in various things.

"Firstly, the corruption sealed within your body stems from an entity known as Inevitability. Clearly, Inevitability is linked to fate. It will subtly disrupt your destiny, leading you to encounter specific individuals and events that you are 'destined' to come across.

"Secondly, it is highly likely that Mr. K has made arrangements to station someone in the shadows, observing you and providing the mob leaders with subtle psychological cues. This leads me to suspect that he is either a Sequence 6 Hypnotist or a Sequence 5 Dreamwalker from the Spectator path. However, based on your earlier description, he also possesses the powers of a Notary. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that he is a Shepherd. Shepherds are Sequence 5 Beyonders from the Secrets Suppliant path, and they serve the entity in whom Mr. K believes.

"Shepherds can graze upon the souls and characteristics of other Beyonders, enabling them to wield their abilities. This renders every Shepherd incredibly formidable, standing at the pinnacle of Mid-Sequence Beyonders.

"Thirdly, this stems from the law of convergence and my previous hypothesis of repulsion. Trust me, I won't be surprised that you will encounter more believers of evil gods, Hunters, and Demonesses in a short span of time.

"Stay diligent, Seven of Wands."

Shepherd? That sounds incredibly powerful... I have already encountered another Hunter and two Demonesses... Lumian ignited Madam Magician's response by channeling his spirituality.

Chapter 179: Feast

As Lumian gazed at the smoldering remnants of the paper, memories of Mr. K's relentless pressure flooded his mind.

So a Shepherd's essence lies in Grazing. They graze upon the souls and characteristics of other Beyonders or Beyonder creatures to harness their abilities...

Thus, a seasoned Shepherd is truly unparalleled. They excel in close combat, long-range attacks, and a multitude of mystical techniques...

In fact, a Contractee is somewhat like a simplified version of a Shepherd. Each contract is limited to a single ability. When one's Sequence is low, the number of contracts is severely restricted. At most, it might reach five, but often it doesn't exceed three. If one fails to choose their abilities wisely, they may struggle to defeat an ordinary person armed with a gun. It's not comparable to a Shepherd's power, where Grazing bestows all abilities, undiminished...

Of course, at the level of the padre, signing ten or twenty contracts becomes a different experience. Furthermore, contracts often target beings from the spirit world with a wide array of peculiar abilities. Beyonders encountering them for the first time will find it challenging to adapt...

The more Lumian pondered, the more dread Mr. K instilled in him.

Suppressing his thoughts, Lumian stood up and let out an inward sigh.

No wonder Madam Magician believes Mr. K can withstand Susanna Mattise—an evil spirit...

Leaving the room, Lumian approached Louis and Sarkota with composure and uttered, "Have the kitchen prepare dinner."

"Boss, what would you like to eat?" Louis inquired before Sarkota could speak.

Lumian couldn't recall the menu at Salle de Bal Brise's attached café. He pondered for a moment and replied, "Bring me a set meal. Join me."

"Alright." Louis signaled Sarkota to inform the café attendant.

Lumian settled at Baron Brignais's favored table and picked up the day's newspaper.

The Trier Gazette adorned the top, followed by The Reformer Daily, People's Voice, Action News, Intis Daily, Friends of the People, and other prominent newspapers.

Lumian couldn't resist turning his head, a hint of amusement in his voice as he asked Louis,

"Is that what Brignais typically reads?"

A mobster concerned about national affairs?
Louis glanced at Sarkota on the other side and replied with a smile, "He doesn't read such things. He only insists that we avoid offending reporters and newspapers. If possible, we should subscribe to influential newspapers. Occasionally, he'll spend money to place s for Salle de Bal Brise, boasting of the presence of captivating dancers here.
"He usually reads the three newspapers and magazines at the bottom."
Avoiding conflicts with newspapers and reporters... That makes sense. If the Trier Gazette publishes news of a significant mob presence in the market district, the Savoie Mob would be doomed the next day. Those old men still value their reputation... Lumian gained a bit more understanding.
He then retrieved the newspapers and magazines from the bottom. There was Novel Weekly, Men's Aesthetics, and Ghost Face, a magazine filled with Trier gossip and contemporary jokes.
Isn't this more interesting than The Reformer Daily and Action News? Lumian picked up Novel Weekly and delved into the latest serialized story.
Casually, he inquired, "Where do the funds and advertising fees for these newspapers come from?"
Louis pondered for a moment, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead, but he couldn't provide an answer. Just then, Sarkota chimed in, "It's deducted from the 100,000 verl d'or we set aside for cultivating ties with the police."
Lumian nodded approvingly, satisfied that it wouldn't hinder his gains as the new leader of the Savoie Mob!
Before long, the café attendant arrived with their food.
Onion minced pigeon, smoked rock crab, hot bamboo chicken pie, stewed mutton brain, stewed veal slices, grilled oysters with vanilla, two salads, scarlet cheese, grilled almond sauce, a glass of red, white, and blue liqueur, and a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.
The fragrant aromas mingled together, wafting into Lumian's nostrils and causing his mouth to water even more.
Just as expected from Trier. Even an ordinary café's set meal offers such a variety of dishes. If this were Loen, I'd be limited to choosing between pan-fried steak or stewed peas with tender mutton... Lumian, being a pure Intisian, mockingly compared Loen's cuisine based on his impressions from various newspapers, magazines, and folk jokes.
He lifted the glass of tricolor liqueur and took a sip, then pointed to the armchairs on either side of the table, saying, "Let's eat together."

Louis bowed slightly and replied with a smile, "Boss, we'll take turns eating after you finish."
Lumian didn't insist and savored his first feast since arriving in Trier—and it was on the house.
It had to be said that the chefs at Salle de Bal Brise were truly skilled. Lumian nodded repeatedly as he enjoyed his meal.
Among the dishes, he found the mutton brain most delightful. Skillfully infused with several spices, the fishy and gamey flavors of the brain were cleverly balanced, leaving behind a delicate texture akin to Roselle tofu, accompanied by a rich and enticing fragrance.
He finished the glass of red, white, and blue liqueur and one-third of the bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. Then, he gestured for Louis and Sarkota to take their turns.
Lumian picked up Novel Weekly and Ghost Face magazines, ready to delve into their contents.
In the pages of Ghost Face, Lumian's eyes fell upon a familiar name: DuVar.
The proprietor of the restaurant renowned for inventing DuVar's broth had amassed a fortune and relocated to Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra.
An intriguing anecdote caught Lumian's attention within the Ghost Face pages:
DuVar's infatuation with Perle, a stage actress from Loen and a Trier courtesan, had cost him a fortune. The tale recounted a banquet held at Perle's private residence, where she lay naked on an enormous silver platter, served by attendants, in the presence of over a dozen guests.
This shattered DuVar's heart. He had even attempted suicide to no avail.
Lumian couldn't decide whether to sigh at the Trieriens' tendency to exaggerate or to jest at the Loenese for not being as conservative as they seemed. It appeared that the latter adapted swiftly in Intis, or perhaps he should mock DuVar for his unblemished innocence despite being a Trierien in his forties.
At times, Lumian couldn't help but wonder if these behaviors stemmed from the influence of a Beyonder's nature or if the followers of the malevolent god couldn't rein in their impulses.
Naturally, had it not been for the shared inclinations among the Trieriens and the fact that many things posed no issues, these individuals would have been exposed long ago.
After Louis and Sarkota had finished their meal, Lumian led them down to the first floor.
The dance hall buzzed with activity in the evening. Jenna stood

upon the wooden stage, her voice carrying a melodious tune accompanied by the band. Couples below embraced one another, twirling around the floor.
Lumian cast a fleeting glance at the scene before redirecting his gaze and striding toward the exit.
"Boss, where are we headed?" Louis inquired.
Lumian chuckled.
"Am I the boss or are you? Do I need to report my whereabouts to you?"
Louis's expression froze. He glanced at the silent Sarkota and suddenly felt that emulating his composure wasn't a bad idea.
"I-I'm merely concerned about our next course of action," he asserted.
As Lumian made his way out of the dance hall, amidst greetings from the bouncers, he smiled and replied, "I will inform you when there is a need for you to know."
He returned to Auberge du Coq Doré but veered away from Room 207, where he had intended to retrieve Mr. K's finger and his revolver. Instead, he ventured into the underground bar.
Before Lumian could assess the situation, Charlie's voice reached his ears, brimming with enthusiasm.
"Have you heard the news? Ciel now goes by the nickname 'Lion' Ciel!
"'Little Minx' Jenna came up with it. Have you laid eyes on her? I doubt you've ever seen a woman as stunning as her. She possesses an alluring figure and a face that could bewitch anyone. When she sings, everyone yearns to abandon their faith for her. And she took a liking to Ciel and invited him to dance. They were inseparable, grinding each other! Oh, the dance hall was dimly lit. You can well imagine what transpired..."
"..." Lumian suddenly felt like he had become the protagonist of a news story in Ghost Face.
Louis and Sarkota, standing behind him, felt both embarrassed and concerned for their boss.
They were embarrassed that the person at the small round table might be boasting on their boss's behalf. They were worried that if it were true, their boss would be making "Red Boots" Franca a cuckold. In that case, they would be in serious trouble. Franca not only held considerable power but was also the mistress of their big boss!
Charlie, holding a beer, caught sight of Lumian, and his smile froze.
He hopped off the small round table and approached Lumian, coughing before speaking.

"Hey, Ciel, would you mind if I shared some details about your romantic entanglement?"
Instead of answering, Lumian asked, "How did you find out?"
Charlie grinned. "Many people know; it spread from the Salle de Gristmill."
In other words, the Poison Spur Mob is aware that I danced with Jenna twice before assassinating "Hammer" Ait? That's true. I only disguised myself back then, without even changing my hair color. I even provoked those around me. In hindsight, coupled with "Hammer" Ait's demise, they will surely recognize me... As Red Boots' mistress, Jenna may also become a target for their vengeance. There's no need to be overly concerned, though. She is protected by Red Boots. As a seasoned Beyonder and a formidable Demoness, Franca won't be careless in such matters... Lumian nodded, understanding the situation.
He smiled at Charlie and said, "Feel free to share."
The more the news spread, the more it would attract Red Boots' attention, deterring any potential reprisal from the Poison Spur Mob.
Lumian asked Charlie, "Why didn't you go to Salle de Bal Brise?"
Charlie forced a smile and replied, "The manager, René, wants me to start officially tomorrow. He offered me 80 verl d'or per month."
As they conversed, Lumian noticed his neighbor sitting at the bar counter.
The abject author Gabriel.
He still sported disheveled, greasy brown hair, large black-framed glasses, a faded linen shirt, and black dungarees.
Lumian bid farewell to Charlie and approached Gabriel, asking, "What's the matter?"
Gabriel, sipping on a glass of light-green absinthe, glanced at him and smiled bitterly.
"My script was rejected. Those managers didn't even bother reading it!
"I've submitted it to dozens of theaters, but no one is willing to give it a chance."
Dozens of theaters... Lumian's heart stirred as he casually inquired, "Did you send your script to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons in our market district?"
"Yes," Gabriel sighed. "Their manager turned me down too. He mentioned that they write their own scripts or commission custom ones."
Lumian took a seat and asked, "Who is their manager?"

Chapter 180: Lazy

Gabriel took a sip of absinthe and spoke, "Maipú Meyer. He's a theater manager with big ambitions. He aims to make Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons the most renowned theater in Trier. His ultimate goal is to be awarded the prestigious Intis Legion of Honor medal."

The Intis Legion of Honor medal originated during the time of Emperor Roselle when he was still a Consul. It was created to replace the nobility system of the old royal family. However, when Roselle declared himself Caesar, the medal was abolished, and titles like dukes, counts, barons, and knights were reintroduced.

Later, when the Intis Republic was established, the Legion of Honor Medal was reinstated. It was given to both military personnel and civilians who made remarkable contributions to the Republic. It wasn't limited to the military but included individuals from various industries. It was the highest honor in the current Intis Republic and being a recipient equated to being a knight from the past.

In the past, painters, authors, actors, journalists, and sculptors had been honored with the Intis Legion of Honor medal, serving as inspirations for future generations.

In the stories he crafted in his dream, he deceived the villagers of Cordu by claiming that Aurore was headed to Trier to receive the Legion of Honor medal. It wasn't entirely implausible. If Aurore could become Intis's renowned Fors Wall and the best-selling author on the Northern Continent, gaining recognition from L'Institut de Intis for her artistic achievements, she might have a genuine chance at obtaining the Legion of Honor medal.

Lumian chuckled and remarked, "If a person lacks dreams, they're no different from salted fish." He found Maipú Meyer, the theater manager, to be quite ordinary.

This led him to believe that the issues with Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons extended beyond the majority of the people. There were only a few individuals closely associated with the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ive, who were peculiar.

After conversing with Gabriel for a while, Lumian guided Louis and Sarkota to the second floor and asked them to wait outside Room 207.

He closed the door behind him, took off his holster from under his left armpit, and stashed away the bullet bag. Then, he put on a dark jacket.

Without delay, Lumian retrieved Mr. K's finger from beneath the pillow and slipped it into his right pocket.

As for Fallen Mercury, the dagger from Hedsey, the awakening gas, and the unidentified liquid, he always carried them with him. However, the bayonet served no immediate purpose, so he left it in a drawer of the wooden table.

Once he completed these actions, Lumian bent down and retrieved a brown suitcase from under the bed. He carefully placed Aurore's grimoires inside.

Given his altered identity and the increased hostility from the Poison Spur Mob, he felt the need to secure these grimoires in a safer and more secluded location—the rented safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

To Lumian, these items held precious clues and knowledge left behind by Aurore. They also possessed an irreplaceable sentimental value that required protection.

As for his daily studies, he would pre-copy a portion of the material and leave it at Auberge du Coq Doré or Salle de Bal Brise. Once he mastered it and ensured there were no issues, he would copy a few more pages at the safe house.

After turning down Louis's offer to assist with his luggage, Lumian made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise and entered a room near the office.

He retrieved the grimoire he had been perusing recently and laid it out on the desk. Taking hold of a dark-red fountain pen, he commenced copying its contents onto a thick stack of white paper.

As he transcribed, Lumian found the task dreadfully dull. Ideas on how to avoid the monotony began to creep into his mind.

Soon enough, an idea struck him.

Why not summon that rabbit-shaped creature from the spirit world, the one who had previously written the report for him, and have it copy his notebook?

Though that creature was dim-witted and lacking in intellect, it proved obedient. It possessed a remarkable speed for copying and could imitate the original handwriting... In that case, all I need to do is provide spirituality while I indulge in reading newspapers and magazines, waiting for my homework to be completed. No, not homework... rather, copying notes... Lumian pondered momentarily before setting his fountain pen down and preparing for the summoning ritual.

If he could find a way to slack off, why not take advantage of it?

Back in Cordu, upon finishing his sister's daily assignments, Lumian often contemplated ways to slack off.

He had been teaching Reimund, Ava, and the others to comprehend words, hoping they could assist him with his homework as they improved.

Alas, the disparity in knowledge between them was too vast. It couldn't be bridged without several years of effort.
Before long, Lumian arranged the altar, consecrated the ritual silver dagger, and erected a wall of spirituality.
As the fragrance of citrus and lavender wafted through the air, he gazed at the candle flame's yellow hue and uttered in ancient Hermes:
"I!"
In the next second, Lumian switched to Hermes.
"I summon in my name:
"Spirit wandering in the void, a friendly creature that can be communicated with, weakling who can write Intisian..."
The candle flame swiftly transformed into a deep shade of green, expanding to the size of a human head.
Completing the remaining incantation, Lumian witnessed the emergence of a translucent and hazy figure from within the candle flame.
Standing at nearly 1.9 meters tall, it possessed the head of an ox atop a human body, garbed in brown fur clothing.
Not the rabbit... That's right. There must be numerous spirit world creatures that fit the description of my summoning incantation. The one who responds to the summons is entirely random... Lumian experienced a mix of disappointment and anticipation as he pointed toward the grimoire.
"Copy it for me."
The ethereal "minotaur" nodded faintly.
"Alright."
Without delay, it seated itself, picked up the dark-red fountain pen, and commenced copying Aurore's grimoire.
Not bad at all, much more intelligent than that silly rabbit... Lumian thought, his delight evident.
Just as he was about to settle into the recliner and peruse the newspapers and magazines, an unsettling feeling washed over him.
Isn't the "minotaur" too slow? More than ten seconds have passed, and it hasn't even copied a word!
No, in fact, it had only written two letters!
"Can you work any faster?" Lumian probed.
"This is already my fastest pace," the "minotaur" responded truthfully.
"..." Lumian was at a loss for words.
It was even worse than the silly rabbit!
That creature, at the very least, functioned like a mystical typewriter. It could complete a full page of copying in less than a

minute!
Lumian unconsciously considered ending the ritual and dismissing the "minotaur" before summoning another spirit world creature. However, knowing that the subsequent ones were likely to be equally peculiar, he abandoned the idea in weariness.
By the time the summoning ritual naturally came to an end, the "minotaur" had managed to copy only half a page.
Lumian rubbed his temples and made up his mind to do it himself.
After transcribing three pages, he heard a knock on the door.
"What's the matter?" Lumian closed his notebook, set aside his fountain pen, and walked toward the door.
It was Louis outside.
In his rugged guise, he lowered his voice and said, "Boss, 'Giant' Simon is here."
What could he want? Lumian recalled that "Giant" Simon was a leader of the Savoie Mob, overseeing a number of dance halls and bars on Rue du Rossignol. He was suspected to be a Beyonder of the Warrior pathway, with a high likelihood of being a Sequence 8 Beyonder.
Louis simply shook his head.
"I don't know."
Lumian inquired, "What did he discuss with Brignais last time? It didn't seem pleasant."
Louis elaborated, "'Giant' Simon has always held a grudge against the baron because he controls Salle de Bal Brise."
He instinctively used the term "baron."
Observing that Lumian didn't take offense, Louis continued, "Salle de Bal Brise's profits surpass those of all his dance halls and bars combined. He even has a casino in his bar!
"The last time he approached the baron, he hoped that the baron would prevent some of the more attractive dancers from coming here and instead have them transferred to Rue du Rossignol. The baron replied, 'Red Boots is in charge of assigning the dancers. I have no objections if you discuss it with her.'
"The prices on Rue du Rossignol are very low. Beautiful dancers are reluctant to work there."
Lumian recollected Charlie mentioning that one could find inexpensive pussies on Rue du Rossignol for as little as 52 coppet, which amounted to just half a verl d'or. On the other hand, at Salle de Bal Brise, if the dancers encountered generous patrons, they could charge up to 10 verl d'or. Typically, they fetched anywhere between 3 to 5 verl d'or.
This was despite the relatively low income in the market district. If

it were Rue de la Muraille in the Red Princess district, an above-average-looking woman would cost dozens of verl d'or.
Is "Giant" Simon envious of my control over Salle de Bal Brise? Lumian nodded subtly, his brows furrowing in puzzlement, and he asked, "There's something I find rather perplexing. Why are Salle de Bal Brise's profits so substantial?"
Louis grinned.
"Most of our alcohol comes from 'Rat' Christo. It's tax-free and incredibly cheap.
"Moreover, we don't have to pay any rent."
"Rat" Christo who is in charge of the smuggling business? Lumian grasped the general reasoning behind it.
He exited the room, strolled along the corridor, and entered the café.
"Giant" Simon, still clad in a snug black formal suit, had his light-yellow hair tightly plastered to his scalp.
He set his wide-brimmed round hat on the table and positioned himself by the window, puffing on a cigarette.
The mobsters trailing behind him dispersed, engaging in an intense standoff with Sarkota and the others at Salle de Bal Brise from a distance.
Spotting Lumian approaching, Simon crushed the cigarette in his hand and put on a feigned wide smile.
"Well, well, Ciel, you've already gained the Boss's approval and managed to get to run Salle de Bal Brise. Why didn't you treat us brothers to a drink?"
As Simon spoke, he strode toward Lumian.
At over 1.9 meters in height, Lumian, who was already standing at 1.8 meters, appeared rather short.
Lumian gazed up at Simon's prominent nose and pockmarked face, returning the smile.
"I have some sort of social phobia, so I couldn't bring myself to invite you guys.
"Hey, you're quite tall. Just as one would expect from a 'Giant.' You're even taller than 'Hammer' Ait."
His words conveyed a message of maintaining their respective territories. If you don't provoke me, I won't provoke you. Otherwise, I'm capable of killing you, just like the Sequence 8 Warrior, 'Hammer' Ait.
"Giant" Simon didn't comprehend the meaning behind the first sentence, but he discerned the provocation in the latter.
His face darkened as a result, simultaneously dispelling his disdain for "Lion" Ciel.
This wasn't merely a brawny man. Smiles and pleasantries

wouldn't get him far!
Simon gestured toward the table where Baron Brignais often sat.
"I need to discuss something with you."

Chapter 181: The Loyal Ciel

Lumian settled back into his seat, taking a casual stance. His gaze locked onto "Giant" Simon as he inquired, "And what's the matter?"
"Giant" Simon's cast his light-blue eyes over Louis and Sarkota standing behind Lumian.
"Aren't they Brignais's men? Why would you allow them to tail you?
"If it were me, I'd put them to work as bouncers."
Louis and Sarkota exchanged anxious glances when Simon hit the nail on the head.
Lumian wanted to applaud, grateful that Simon had provided him with an opportunity to win their trust.
However, he couldn't entirely trust Louis and Sarkota. He had no desire to become a mobster, but he didn't want to be shot in the back, riddled with bullets someday.
Lumian smirked once again.
"What do you mean Brignais's men? I used to work under Brignais!"
"We're all members of the Savoie Mob, loyal to the Boss. As long as I remain faithful, there's no need to worry about them turning against me!"
Louis and Sarkota nodded repeatedly, impressed by Ciel's broad-mindedness and demeanor.
That's right. Baron Brignais changed our status in the Savoie Mob and gave us a lot of trust, but we're still members of the Savoie Mob. Betraying the Boss is out of the question. And it was the Boss who commanded us to follow Ciel and obey his orders!
Simon choked on Lumian's words. After a few seconds, he finally said, "You may be loyal to the Boss, but others might not be. Brignais is ambitious."
You find Brignais unloyal to the Boss? Hidden Blade... Uh... 'Red Boots' Franca mentioned that Brignais hasn't been obedient lately... Lumian suddenly felt pity for Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob.
His most capable subordinates lacked loyalty, and his favorite mistress had ulterior motives. The newcomer he had recently promoted turned out to be a spy from another organization...
Realizing he couldn't shake off Louis and Sarkota, two thugs who often accompanied Baron Brignais and had knowledge of various matters, Simon steered the conversation back on track.
"I came here to discuss the dancers' basic salary."
"F*cking dammit, why the bloody hell do we have to give those sluts money every day, even when they don't have a single

customer?
"Franca is overbearing. Just because she's the Boss's mistress, she convinced him to agree to such an unreasonable demand!
"We're mobsters, not a charity. By Steam, when I handed money to those women, I felt like a bloody priest!
"That's fine by me. I only need to give them a few licks each day. But it's 1 verl d'or a day for Salle de Bal Brise. The textile workers in Quartier du Jardin Botanique earn only 1.5 verl d'or a day, and they work from morning till night!"
In Trier, hiring female workers cost 55-70% of hiring male workers. The most ruthless employers were unafraid of being investigated, and those who dared to employ child labor paid only 15% of an adult man's salary, or even less.
No wonder Franca's beautiful dancers refused to work on Rue du Rossignol. The prices there are low, and the base salary is meager... *Why are you cursing like Franca and Jenna? Can vulgarities be contagious?* Aurore seemed to curse in the same manner during her occasional bouts of madness... Lumian deliberately ignored Louis's suggestion and asked with a smile, "What's your plan?"
Simon's fury remained etched on his face.
"You, me, and Black, we'll go to the Boss together. We must make him change his mind and rein in Franca!
"Which of the other mobs pays their dancers a base salary?"
Is he trying to take advantage of my recent takeover of Salle de Bal Brise? *Is he inciting me to rebel against the Boss?* Heh heh, as Aurore once said, the early worm gets eaten by birds, and ravens who stick their necks out get shot... Lumian raised his hands, cracking his knuckles with a sly smile.
"It's pointless. Franca is the Boss's mistress. The Boss will undoubtedly heed her. If you want him to change his mind, there's only one way—become the boss yourself!"
Is this something you should say in front of so many people? Louis, Sarkota, and the others behind Lumian were so terrified that they almost covered their leader's mouth.
"Giant" Simon also appeared taken aback.
"What nonsense are you spouting?"
Most of his thugs trembled with fear.
"What I mean is..." Lumian suddenly seized the table's edge and flung it at "Giant" Simon!
Clang!
The table crashed to the ground, and the cups upon it shattered into shards.
"Giant" Simon had already retreated two steps, his expression

darkening. His subordinates instinctively reached for their revolvers. He looked at Lumian and demanded,
"What do you want?"
Lumian stood behind the upturned wooden table, seething with anger.
"You wretched dogsh*t, does the Boss mean anything to you? How dare you plot a mutiny in secret, attempting to force him to change his orders!
"Do you truly aspire to be the boss?
"The Boss's commands must be carried out, whether they're good or bad. If there's an issue, you can address it with the Boss privately, but you cannot conspire with others to coerce him!"
The question exposed "Giant" Simon's true intentions, leaving him unable to explode in anger or continue inciting Ciel.
He spat out his words. "Damn it, is there something wrong with your brain? When did I say I wanted to force the Boss? I merely suggested that everyone should approach the Boss and explain that providing a dancer with a base salary is unreasonable. It places a heavy burden on us."
With that, "Giant" Simon waved his hand, wearing an expression that conveyed difficulty in communicating with Ciel. He turned and departed, his subordinates trailing after him, descending the staircase.
Observing their departure, Lumian inwardly chuckled.
Thank you so much. Tomorrow, no, tonight, the Boss will come to know how loyal I am!
Lumian had stumbled upon an opportunity to earn Gardner Martin's trust, and he seized it without hesitation.
Putting on a show, he simulated an angry exhale, restraining his emotions. Pointing at the mess on the floor, he commanded Louis and the others, "Clean this up."
Just as Lumian finished speaking, a figure emerged from the shadows near the staircase.
It was Jenna, having finished her performance in the dance hall.
Jenna wasn't wearing a revealing outfit today. Her rose-colored dress, supported by a petticoat, made her resemble an upside-down flower. Her brownish-yellow hair was tied in a simple bun at the back, with some loose strands cascading gently. The dark circles around her blue eyes were less pronounced, lending her a touch of elegance. A mole adorned the middle of her left cheek.
This symbolized elegance.
Observing Jenna, Lumian couldn't help but chuckle.
"Do the folks in the market district appreciate this style?"
He was referring to Jenna's less provocative attire.

Jenna smiled smugly.
"It works surprisingly well from time to time. Franca mentioned that sometimes, the more unattainable something appears to men, the more they desire it. F*ck, I can't quite fathom that mentality."
"What's the matter?" Lumian glanced at the waiters tidying up and found another table to sit at.
Jenna took a seat opposite him and smiled.
"I'm here to discuss the singing fee for next week. Previously, it was 10 songs per night, 4 verl d'or, and a third of the money thrown onto the stage.
"Lately, it seems I've become more popular than in the past few months!"
Lumian pondered for a moment before responding.
"Has the Poison Spur Mob grown suspicious of you, making it difficult for you to perform at their dance halls?"
"F*ck, that infuriates me! Couldn't you have disguised yourself better? You were identified so easily, and it ended up implicating me!" Jenna replied indignantly.
A mischievous grin played at the corners of Lumian's mouth.
"Starting from today, you will still perform 10 songs per night, but the fee will be increased to 10 verl d'or. You can keep two-thirds of the money thrown onto the stage."
Louis, who stood behind Lumian, felt a pang of sorrow.
Although Little Minx didn't sing here every night, she frequented the place several times a week. This change would result in Salle de Bal Brise earning 2,000 verl d'or less annually!
However, it seemed that Little Minx had played a significant role in the assassination of "Hammer" Ait, the mob leader. As a consequence, she had lost the opportunity to perform in Poison Spur Mob's territory, amounting to a loss of over 1,000 verl d'or per year.
Jenna appeared quite content.
Receiving 10 verl d'or for 10 songs and keeping two-thirds of the money thrown on stage was the most generous treatment in the underground singer industry.
She smiled and said, "I can only come for three days next week, from Friday to Sunday night."
"Seeking opportunities at dance halls in other districts?" Lumian inquired casually.
Jenna shook her head.
"No, I don't have that much time to bloody sing. I have other things to attend to."
"Isn't being an underground singer your profession?" Lumian

inquired curiously.
"This is just a part-time gig!" Jenna emphasized with a smirk. "My main job is being the shared mistress of 'Lion' Ciel and 'Red Boots' Franca!"
Louis's legs nearly buckled at the jest.
In his mind, Franca was a possessive woman. She had taught a lesson to any man who dared to snatch Little Minx away from her. If the boss truly became involved with Little Minx, he would undoubtedly face Red Boots' fury!
This fellow has other identities? Lumian's thoughts raced as he asked thoughtfully, "Is Jenna your real name or an alias?"
Part-time underground singers often adopted an alias to avoid impacting their other occupations.
Jenna's lips curled up, and she blinked before replying, "What do you think, Monsieur Ciel?"
She deliberately emphasized the name Ciel, implying that he, too, used an alias.
With that, Jenna rose from her seat, leaned across the wooden table, and whispered into Lumian's ear, "After hearing your conversation with 'Giant' Simon, I have a sincere suggestion. The less loyal someone is, the more they boast about their loyalty. Your performance went a bit overboard, hehe."
Jenna straightened up, wearing an air of pride, and confidently walked toward the staircase.
Finally, it was her turn to "educate" Ciel!
Is that so? Lumian pondered as he watched Jenna's departing figure.
"Aren't you wearing perfume today?"
Jenna turned around, her expression brimming with delight as she inquired, "So you didn't notice me ascending the stairs?"

Chapter 182: Truth Serum

"What do you think, Madame Jenna?" Lumian grinned, throwing Jenna's own words back at her.

"Damn it!" Jenna exclaimed, raising her hand in frustration before turning around with a scowl and storming back downstairs.

Lumian pondered for a few moments, tapping the table in front of him. He turned to Louis and Sarkota and said, "Bring me a glass of fennel absinthe."

Being the "protector" of Salle de Bal Brise had its perks, and his meals here were on the house.

As he remembered that he had to hand over most of the dance hall's profits to the Boss and bribe the police, Lumian felt less inclined to be frugal.

No matter how difficult things became, he couldn't let himself suffer. He had to do his utmost to make the Boss suffer instead!

Lumian drank two glasses of the bitter, mind-altering light-green liquid and remained at Salle de Bal Brise until nearly midnight.

Standing up, he turned to Louis and Sarkota and declared, "I'm going to bed. Wait until the dance hall closes before you head home.

"If anyone causes trouble, throw them out. If you can't handle them alone, gather everyone and be bold enough to take action. Don't worry, I'll take responsibility if anything goes wrong."

What he left unsaid was: If I can't handle the responsibility, I'll leave it for the Boss to worry about.

Salle de Bal Brise stayed open until 2 a.m. every day, usually opening between 10:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

"Yes, Boss," Sarkota and Louis replied in unison.

Upon returning to his bedroom, Lumian lingered for another fifteen minutes before grabbing the brown suitcase containing Aurore's grimoires. He squeezed out of the window and smoothly landed on the ground from the second floor.

He walked through the shadows, turning from Avenue du Marché into Rue des Blouses Blanches, and entered the safe house he had rented previously.

After hiding the grimoires and releasing some sulfur to repel the bugs, Lumian left the room and turned into an alley behind Rue des Blouses Blanches. He planned to take a detour to Auberge du Coq Doré, where he would spend the night.

After walking a dozen steps, he noticed a pile of trash beside a barricade.

Scavengers and cleaners wouldn't come until the next morning to clean it up. At that moment, it had become a haven for rats,

cockroaches, flies, and stray dogs.
Seeing the rats and stray dogs, Lumian suddenly remembered something.
Among the three metal canisters he had acquired from the perverted Hedsey, one remained unidentified.
I might as well give it a try... Lumian nodded to himself imperceptibly.
Relying on his exceptional skills, lightning-fast reflexes, nimble movements, and keen observation, he swiftly stepped on a rat with grayish-black fur. He crouched down, retrieved the slightly heavy metal canister, and poured some odorless, colorless liquid into the "prey's" mouth.
The rat let out a quick squeak, but aside from that, nothing out of the ordinary happened.
Considering the pervert's methods, I thought it might be an aphrodisiac, but it doesn't seem like it... That makes sense. That pervert possesses Beyonder powers that stimulate desire. He wouldn't need an additional canister with the same effect... Lumian lifted his right foot, watching as the rat scurried back to its companions. It joined the swarm while emitting continuous squeaks, but it didn't do anything else.
Strange... Lumian stared at the rat for a prolonged moment, unable to discern anything significant.
Suddenly, a voice as clear as crystal rang out from behind him.
"What are you up to?"
Lumian whirled around and beheld "Red Boots" Franca emerging from the shadows at the far end of the alley.
She still sported her trademark red boots, off-white breeches, and a black-and-white checkered blouse. Her flaxen hair was neatly tied up.
Why are you here? Lumian was about to inquire, but he promptly recalled that Franca resided at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
He could only respond honestly, "Conducting an experiment."
"What kind of experiment?" Franca approached with curiosity.
Her eyes, resembling sparkling lakes, surveyed the rats before she let out a chuckle.
"Has your sister taught you to experiment on rats?"
"Are you referring to laboratory rats?" Lumian found it easy to converse with Franca. Many words required no further explanation.
He then said, "Didn't Jenna inform you that after I disposed of the pervert, I obtained three metal canisters? One contained gas that could render people unconscious. I depleted it when I eliminated 'Hammer' Ait. The second canister contained an accompanying

gaseous stimulant, and there's still a fair amount left.
"The third canister holds a liquid. I'm unsure of its properties. Hence, I experimented on these rats."
Understanding dawned on Franca's face.
"So, it's a leftover from that pervert."
She then asked with anticipation, "Could it be an aphrodisiac?"
Why do you share my thoughts, Madame? Lumian gestured towards the squeaking rat, finding amusement in the situation.
"It doesn't seem so. You appear somewhat disappointed?"
Franca didn't conceal her feelings and let out a sigh.
"Indeed. If it were truly an aphrodisiac, how intriguing it would be."
"If it were indeed an aphrodisiac, what would you want to use it for?" Lumian suddenly harbored suspicions that Franca intended to do something to Jenna.
Franca glanced at him.
"Damn it, are you accusing me in your mind? Do you think I have no moral boundaries?
"I hope it's an aphrodisiac. My main curiosity lies in experiencing its effects and effectiveness. I would consume some myself and have Gardner try it as well. If his mistresses desire, they can partake too. Do you understand the pleasures of flirtation and amusement?"
"..." Lumian was momentarily at a loss for words. After a few seconds, he responded, "You Trierians certainly excel at games."
"I'm not a Trierian," Franca retorted, "but I concur with your statement."
She turned her gaze towards the metal canister in Lumian's grasp.
"Shall I assist you in discovering its properties?"
"Aren't you concerned about the dangers?" Lumian was somewhat taken aback.
It remained uncertain whether this vial of liquid was a slow-acting poison or a vessel for curses!
Franca chuckled and replied, "You truly need to supplement your knowledge of mysticism.
"I intend to employ divination. Witches possess considerable divinatory abilities."
Aurore's grimoires made no mention of it. They solely documented the Witch's Potion, which causes gender transformation. It speculates that every Witch excels in spells... Yes, those proficient in spells shouldn't be lacking in divination... Lumian handed the liquid-filled canister to Franca.
Franca walked to the edge of the alley and halted behind a five-story building.

She extended her right hand and traced it back and forth on the dim glass window.
Simultaneously, she softly recited something in Hermes. Even with Lumian's acute hearing, he could only catch a few words.
Spirituality... Inquiry... Answer...
A few seconds later, the glass window darkened and deepened, as though it led to an enigmatic, unknown world.
Franca stepped back, raised the metal canister, and spoke in Intis, "What is the purpose of the liquid inside?"
From the depths of the glass window, an aged voice responded, "Induces an urge to confess."
Franca nodded, expressed gratitude, and concluded the divination.
As the glass window returned to its original state, she turned to Lumian and stated, "It appears to be a concoction akin to a truth serum."
"Truth serum?" Lumian inquired.
Aurore had never mentioned such a term.
Franca casually explained, "It's a serum that compels people to speak the truth.
"Once their desire to spill their secrets is triggered, along with the interrogator's questioning, although there may be a fair amount of nonsense, it becomes exceedingly challenging to lie. What they utter should stem from their innermost desires."
Confiding their desires... Similar to the pervert's other abilities, involving diverse human yearnings... As expected of a boon from the Mother Tree of Desire... This could prove quite useful for a Beyonder like me, who lacks proficiency in spirit communication and divination... Lumian retrieved the metal canister from Franca.
Franca glanced around and queried with a smile, "Why did you choose Rue des Blouses Blanches for the experiment? Shouldn't your activities be centered around Avenue du Marché and Rue Anarchie?"
Lumian withheld nothing.
"I rented a safe house here to safeguard my sister's grimoires. I fear they may be damaged if I am targeted."
"Very cautious," Franca nodded approvingly. "Your sister is fortunate to have a brother like you. I used to have a brother too. He was conceited, enjoyed flaunting his skills, and lacked practicality. I yearned to teach him a lesson every day..."
She trailed off midway, her gaze falling upon her red boots.
Used to have. Does that imply he is no longer present? Lumian keenly sensed Franca's unspoken meaning and promptly understood the reason behind her sudden despondency.
After a few seconds, Franca's smile returned.

"Your sister must trust you too. Otherwise, she wouldn't have revealed our organization to you. Although we never explicitly mentioned keeping the research society a secret from our families, hardly anyone ever discloses it. After all..."

Franca fell silent once more, her smile taking on a bitter tinge.

After all, what? Lumian was perplexed, but he refrained from asking. Instead, he simply elaborated on Aurore's rationale.

"We were caught in a calamity back then, unsure of who would survive and who would perish. That's why my sister divulged some secrets to me, hoping they would prove useful in the future."

"Understood." Franca nodded, regaining her composure. She smiled and remarked, "I thought you came to Rue des Blouses Blanches in search of me, eager to learn about mysticism."

"It's too late now." Lumian was already feeling weary.

Franca clicked her tongue and chuckled.

"I won't do anything to you. It's too... too mad and shameful to engage in such activities with someone who knows my true gender."

Is that so? I was afraid that once you got accustomed to it, the shame would only heighten your excitement... Lumian suspected that Franca, who could be swayed by the notion of "Life is short, why not give it a try," would engage in more unforeseen endeavors.

After bidding farewell to the Demoness, he returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

Nothing eventful occurred in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman until Thursday.

At 8 p.m., Lumian arrived at 19 Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard and met Mr. K in the basement.

Mr. K gestured towards the three assistants holding silver trays behind him and stated, "There are a total of three mystical items, each priced between 15,000 verl d'or and 20,000. Make your selection."

Chapter 183: Three Items

Upon entering the basement, Lumian's eyes immediately fell upon three silver plates holding the items.

There was an unassuming white glove, a pair of gold-rimmed glasses with a tea-colored tint, and a shiny golden button.

Observing Lumian's interest in the mystical objects, Mr. K, seated in a red armchair, introduced them in a low, raspy voice, "That glove is Circus. It grants you some weak but peculiar mystical abilities. It can conjure a gust of wind, create fog, and use bursts of light to mess with your target's vision. By touching them, you can freeze your enemies. You can also open most doors without a key. It can even guide you through solid walls.

"These techniques suit your need for mysticism, but remember, carrying it will make you lose your way more often. And sometimes, getting lost brings misfortune.

"Price is 18,000 verl d'or."

Sounds like the Sequence 8 Trickmaster of the Apprentice pathway mentioned in Aurore's grimoires... Although the powers aren't formidable, if used as support alongside traps or my close combat skills and revolver shots, they can yield miraculous results. Lumian found solace in the positive effects of the Circus glove, compensating for his lack of mysticism and helplessness in certain situations.

However, the negative effects were dire. For Hunters who relied on tracking and pathfinding, losing their way frequently meant losing their strengths entirely. Misfortune could strike at any moment, even without wearing the glove. Merely having it in his pocket would affect Lumian.

Mr. K shifted his attention to the brown, gold-rimmed glasses and addressed Lumian, "Do you remember the painting from the gathering?"

Painting? Lumian's mind immediately conjured the image of the dizzying oil painting.

The painting, reputedly created by a Beyonder before his demise, boasted vibrant colors, a peculiar pattern, and a hallucinatory scene. It seemed as if the artist had descended into madness before his death.

"I do." Lumian nodded.

Mr. K continued, "After the painting's owner passed away, his Beyonder attributes together with a strange power fused into his glasses, creating a unique mystical item.

"It allows the wearer to perceive things invisible to the naked eye. Occasionally, one can glimpse the truth of this world to some

extent..."
Aurore's cautionary words echoed in Lumian's mind: "Don't see what you shouldn't see, don't listen to what you shouldn't hear."
Internally, Lumian couldn't help but criticize, Isn't this pair of glasses doing the exact opposite? It's like a weapon of self-destruction! These items seem to have nothing to do with my two needs...
Mr. K glanced at Lumian, his voice still low and raspy in the confined basement. "By perceiving the world from a different perspective and witnessing the once-invisible, the wearer will be seized by an uncontrollable urge to paint. Each painting produced will possess supernatural effects. For instance, a painting of an ocean will make onlookers feel as if they're drowning."
"In a similar vein, if you apply various cosmetics to your face instead of painting on canvas, you can achieve an excellent disguise. Anyone scrutinizing your face will be convinced that it's your true appearance, albeit temporarily."
"Remember, once you've painted a 'new' face, avoid looking in the mirror. Otherwise, you'll believe it to be your real self. Slowly but surely, your body and mind will transform until you become an entirely different person."
"Much like this, you can't sustain that newfound countenance indefinitely. After a span of three hours or more, your sense of self will gradually succumb to its influence until you wholeheartedly believe that you are one and the same."
Upon analyzing the possible Beyonder domain of the mystical item, Lumian couldn't help but speculate, It sounds akin to the hypnosis and suggestions of the Psychiatrist pathway, but it differs greatly in other aspects... Considering the demise of the painter, could it be a power or aura left behind by an evil god?
Mr. K fixed his gaze on the brown glasses.
"Its previous owner was a Lawyer, which enables it to manipulate the target's thoughts, cognition, and conclusions to a certain extent through words, actions, or a series of processes.
"You can probably surmise its negative effects. Seeing what should remain unseen and perceiving the truth of the world without adequate protection exposes you to unknown dangers. Perhaps, one day, you may meet a peculiar death like the painter, leaving behind an enigmatic painting.
"The price is 15,000 verl d'or."
Corresponding to a Sequence 9 Lawyer? The crucial aspect lies in the peculiar power associated with it. Yes, it doesn't fully reflect a Lawyer's abilities. Aurore's grimoires describe Lawyers as masters of eloquence and reasoning, adept at uncovering loopholes in rules

and exploiting their opponents' weaknesses. They create an advantageous atmosphere to achieve ultimate victory. They can influence judgment, thoughts, and conclusions through their words, actions, and established processes. Additionally, they excel at utilizing the power of order... Lumian mentally reviewed the relevant mystical knowledge.

However, he remained uncertain about the Lawyer trait, particularly how to harness the power of order. Aurore lacked knowledge in that regard as well.

In essence, the brown gold-rimmed glasses fulfilled Lumian's need for better disguises. They also provided mystical means that required preparation but were less troublesome than the Alms Monk's elaborate rituals.

The only issue was its perilous nature!

Lumian contemplated, but didn't reach a final decision. He awaited Mr. K's introduction of the golden button.

Before long, Mr. K's raspy voice resounded again.

"It's called Flare. It originated from a deceased Light Suppliant.

"It grants additional buffs such as courage and strength through singing. It enables you to sense the presence of undead creatures and evil entities. You can also employ spells and rituals from the Sun domain, making it highly effective against undead souls and similar targets.

"After wearing it, you'll feel compelled to sing. Darkness and cold become unbearable, and you'll yearn for sunlight and warmth. If you haven't removed it after half an hour, you'll become a devoted follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, earnestly praising the Sun.

"The price is 20,000 verl d'or."

If it can resolve my issue of resisting the undead, the negative effects are bearable... The problem lies in the limited viable targets... Lumian pondered deeply, torn between which item to choose.

His rationale suggested opting for Flare or Circus, yet he couldn't make a decisive choice.

The brown gold-rimmed glasses catered to both of his needs and were his preferred option.

By wearing them solely before disguising himself and creating paintings with supernatural effects in a safe environment, he could effectively evade most of the negative consequences. Thus, he would avoid witnessing things he shouldn't and the so-called truth of the world.

In essence, it wasn't an item that needed constant donning. Lumian could choose the opportune moment to utilize it.

This way, he could proactively construct a spiritual barrier,

screening out anomalies, similar to when he performed the Summoning Dance.
Considering his seal, the "coincidences" of Inevitability, and the occasional Summoning Dance, Lumian didn't believe an additional trait would worsen matters.
"I want those glasses."
Mr. K appeared taken aback by Lumian's choice. After a few seconds, he queried, "Are you certain?"
"I'm certain." Lumian produced a small cloth bag brimming with banknotes and meticulously counted out 15,000 verl d'or.
Mr. K refrained from further persuasion, emitting a raspy chuckle. "You're even crazier than I presumed."
There was a hint of admiration in his tone.
Instructing the attendant to accept the 15,000 verl d'or and hand over the brown glasses to Lumian, Mr. K nodded and remarked, "You can give them a test run here. It's safe enough."
Lumian caressed the frame and discovered that the seemingly metallic material had an odd rubbery texture.
I'll dub you the Mystery Prying Glasses... Lumian pondered, recalling his sister's Beyonder pathway.
In the ensuing moment, he placed the brown gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose.
Almost instantly, he beheld a multitude of scenes from various angles.
The mottled ceiling, bloodstains in the corners, Mr. K's back that should have been out of sight, and the attendants stationed in the corridor...
Lumian also caught sight of a blot of darkness, a silhouette, a gaze emanating from an unknown source, and a visage concealed within the shadows.
Beneath the hood lay black, feathery hair, delicate features, sunken eyes, dark orbs, and ageless skin, only visible from below.
Is that Mr. K's face? Lumian experienced a sudden revelation.
Images from different perspectives flooded his mind, leaving him feeling lightheaded. His state of mind grew increasingly abnormal, and an insatiable urge to capture everything overcame him.
Hastily, Lumian removed the Mystery Prying Glasses, and his vision reverted to normal. Yet, the compulsion to draw lingered within him.
Exhaling deeply, he declared, "It's tolerable."
Mr. K offered a brief warning, "Try to employ it in familiar and secure situations."
After bidding farewell to Mr. K and departing the Psychic's headquarters, Lumian boarded a carriage back to Le Marché du

Quartier du Gentleman.
En route, as he passed through Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, a thought struck him.
I must gather some canvases, brushes, and paints...
Even though my skills are limited to sketching and not particularly exceptional, the quality of the painting shouldn't influence the attached supernatural effects. Perhaps, the more distorted and grotesque it appears, the better the outcome...
Fifteen minutes later, Lumian alighted from the carriage ahead of schedule and located a shop specializing in oil painting supplies.
Upon hearing the price, he couldn't help but inquire, "What? 160 verl d'or? A single canvas costs 160 verl d'or?"

Chapter 184: Painting

When Lumian stepped back into the Auberge du Coq Doré, his mind was still filled with the exorbitant cost of painting supplies.

Among his colleagues at the Salle de Bal Brise, Charlie's monthly salary as a waiter was considered decent. However, it would take him two months of forgoing food and drink just to afford a single roll of canvas!

Lumian couldn't help but view painters as a destitute lot. How could they ever afford canvases, brushes, paints, wooden frames, human models, and all the other expenses that came with their craft?

Perhaps they relied on financial support from their families just to get by. Shaking off these thoughts, Lumian closed the door behind him and carefully placed the stack of items on the wooden table.

Eventually, he resigned himself to the fact that he couldn't afford proper canvases. Instead, he settled for the cheapest brushes, paints, paper, and other necessities. The truth was, Lumian didn't aspire to be a painter or have his work displayed in an exhibition. He simply needed a medium to imbue the supernatural power, obtained from the Mystery Prying Glasses. The quality of the paint, the possibility of cracking, the fading over time, or even his painting skills were all inconsequential matters.

And so, Lumian spent a total of 30 verl d'or, acquiring his modest supplies.

Mixing a palette of vibrant colors and unfurling a flexible sheet of white paper, Lumian prepared himself for the ritual ahead. With the sanctified silver dagger in hand, he crafted a wall of spirituality within Room 207.

His intention was to explore what he could draw and observe the effects it would yield.

Based on the reaction of Madam Magician's messenger at Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian surmised that there was nothing particularly abnormal about this place. The only notable issue seemed to be the abundance of bedbugs. Susanna Mattise's predicament most likely had its origins in Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons or perhaps even an underground cavern.

Taking a slow breath, Lumian retrieved the brown glasses with golden rims and carefully placed them upon the bridge of his nose.

In an instant, the world around him seemed to spin, as if he had plummeted from the sky into the depths of the earth.

During this disorienting journey, Lumian beheld the inverted motel with its occupants moving about in a similar fashion, an underground bar, roots of trees and soil extending beneath the

surface, rats lurking in the corners, and vermin scurrying about.
Deeper and deeper he fell, enduring the nauseating sensation of weightlessness.
And then, he caught sight of an immense network of brownish-green roots stretching in all directions, reaching into the distance and vanishing into the void.
"Ugh..." Lumian nearly expelled the contents of his stomach. The remnants of his unfinished dinner rose to his throat, threatening to escape.
Swiftly, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and fought the urge to vomit. Fueled by an insatiable desire to draw, Lumian picked up a paintbrush, dipped it into the paint, and began sketching upon the blank canvas.
Unbeknownst to him, his spirituality infused the brush with an increasing vigor.
After a few minutes, Lumian halted his strokes and gazed upon his creation.
What in the world have I drawn? The question echoed in his mind.
Upon careful observation, he managed to discern the subject of his artwork: a triangular house with a grayish-blue hue, its roof adorned with green trees, and rain resembling mud.
Lumian stared at the painting for a moment and suddenly felt an itching sensation on the back of his hand. Unable to resist, he scratched it, only to witness his skin turning red and swollen, accompanied by an all-over itchiness.
Could this be the Beyonder influence of the painting? Lumian's heart stirred as he looked away, attempting to soothe the irritation through the friction of his clothes. But his efforts were in vain, and he couldn't help but scratch a few more times.
As he averted his gaze from the child-like graffiti of an "oil painting," the itching gradually subsided and eventually vanished.
It is indeed a problem with the painting, Lumian thought, letting out a sigh of relief.
The urge to paint had vanished as well.
He turned around and contemplated the details.
I have to stare at the painting for at least three seconds before my body itches...
It's challenging to use it in battle. I can't just stick it on my face, can I?
If I use it as a trap, it might have some utility...
I wonder if there are any paintings that can be used without drawing the target's attention?
After careful consideration, Lumian resolved to make another attempt.

He donned the Mystery Prying Glasses once more, and the experience was nearly identical.
However, this time he also glimpsed deep darkness and shadowy figures moving within it.
Amidst the waves of nausea, Lumian removed his brown gold-rimmed glasses, retrieved a fresh sheet of paper, and took up a paintbrush.
This time, he didn't surrender to impulsive strokes but instead focused on visualizing what he desired and endeavored to bring the drawing closer to the image in his mind.
With this approach, Lumian crafted a golden-red sun, surrounded by a vibrant circle of colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.
As he finished, Room 207 suddenly warmed, and the chill in the air dissipated.
It seems to have a simple exorcism effect... Lumian wasn't entirely certain.
He sat on the edge of the bed, carefully observing the changes.
Over time, the warmth, which initially evoked restlessness and unease, began to fade.
Lumian attempted to fold the painting, keeping its back facing outward. The warmth promptly vanished, and the loss of spiritual essence within the painting slowed to a barely noticeable pace.
I should be able to preserve it for about two months... When unfurled, it can only be used for three days at most... Yes, this is akin to an alternative method of creating Beyonder weapons. Lumian estimated, recalling his previous experiences.
Drawing two paintings in quick succession had placed a considerable burden on his spirituality.
After taking a short break, Lumian proceeded with his third experiment.
This time, he switched to using makeup-related painting tools.
Putting on the Mystery Prying Glasses once again, he braced himself for the sensation of spiraling into the depths. In the midst of it, Lumian caught sight of several indistinct figures lurking in the shadows. Removing the mystical item, he began smearing various substances on his face, carefully tracing lines with the aid of the glass window, which was illuminated by the light of the carbide lamp.
Similar to his previous attempt, Lumian made an effort to maintain control over his makeup, but occasionally, his instincts took over.
Reflecting on the "mirror," he saw his appearance becoming worn and haggard. His eyebrows appeared disheveled, his cheekbones

slightly more pronounced, and his lips a touch fuller.
It felt as if he were looking at a stranger. Hastily averting his gaze, he drew the curtain to conceal the result of his "painting."
Having packed away the Itchiness and Sun paintings along with the various tools, Lumian decided it was time to venture out and verify the effects.
As he made his way to Salle de Bal Brise, he noticed Jenna engaging in flamboyant gestures while singing at the top of her lungs, and Charlie, who had just delivered some drinks to the outskirts of the dance floor.
The thugs paid no attention to Lumian, and none of them addressed him as their boss. Feeling a sense of relief, Lumian walked over to Charlie's side, gave his shoulder a friendly pat, and smiled. "Good evening!"
Charlie, clad in a white shirt and black vest, turned around, returning the smile as he asked,
"Good evening, Monsieur. Would you like something to drink?"
Deliberately, Lumian inquired, "Don't you recognize me?"
Caught off guard, Charlie's eyes widened, and for a few seconds, he gazed at the distant gas wall lamp.
Suddenly, a smile spread across his face, and he exclaimed in astonishment, "It's you! Praise the Sun. How long has it been since we last met? Just wait a moment. I'll come to you as soon as I'm not so busy!"
Charlie pointed towards the bar counter and bid Lumian farewell.
"This kid's acting skills are quite impressive," Lumian chuckled with satisfaction. "He didn't even recognize his own boss, me!"
Shifting his gaze, Lumian approached Jenna's stage, patiently waiting for her to finish singing a song filled with vulgar lyrics.
As soon as Jenna finished collecting the copper and silver coins from the stage and descended, Lumian eagerly greeted her and exclaimed, "You sang magnificently! Can I treat you to a drink?"
Jenna immediately put on a cautious expression.
Ever since the incident with that perverted Hedsey, she couldn't afford to be careless around any audience member who approached her. She worried about encountering another unpleasant situation.
For a few seconds, she examined Lumian's face and forced a smile to conceal her wariness.
"I must preserve my voice for my next song! Help me out by having another drink!"
With a wink, Jenna approached the two mobsters guarding the stage, seeking their assistance.
The mobsters didn't dare offend Showy Diva, who was rumored to

be their boss and Red Boots' lover. Stepping forward, they positioned themselves between Lumian and Jenna.
Seizing the opportunity, Jenna made her way to the lounge near the bar counter.
Before leaving, she glanced at Lumian's hair color and scrutinized his face intently for a moment. She muttered to herself, "Bloody hell, is this some sort of fashion trend now?"
Lumian happily averted his gaze and turned toward the staircase leading to the café. The two vigilant mobsters guarding the area stopped him.
Very dutiful... Lumian smiled and replied, "Just going for a cup of coffee!"
After observing Lumian closely for a few seconds, the two mobsters stepped aside.
Entering the café and noticing that Louis and Sarkota had nothing to do, Lumian made his way to the washroom.
He didn't dare look at himself in the mirror. Instead, he splashed tap water on his face and rubbed it a few times, gradually removing his makeup.
When he was done, he looked at the mirror and saw his pale and weary reflection staring back at him.
It drains my spirituality quite a bit... I even painted two artworks earlier, Lumian thought to himself, regaining his composure before leaving the washroom.
Louis glanced around and stood up in surprise.
"Boss! When did you return?"
"Just now," Lumian replied, pointing towards the corridor. "I'm going to get some rest."
"Understood, Boss," Louis and Sarkota responded obediently, refraining from questioning further.
Lumian entered his room, compelled himself to freshen up, and settled down on the bed, drifting into sleep.
In his dream, he experienced the unbearable sensation of freefalling from midair towards the ground. As he plummeted, the earth beneath him unexpectedly cracked open, revealing a sea of raging flames. Lumian felt a searing and piercing pain in his mind. He snapped his eyes open, sitting up and gasping for breath.
In that moment, the room was enveloped in darkness and silence. Only a faint glow of crimson moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a dim light upon the desk beside the window.

Chapter 185: Missing Goods

Why did I have such a dream? It felt eerily real... Lumian collected himself and assessed his condition, but found nothing amiss.

Yet, in his dream, he felt as though he was once again wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses, and they revealed even more.

After pondering for a while, Lumian suspected that the negative effects of wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses three times in a row still lingered. They seemed to have seeped into his subconscious, manifesting in his dream within the confines of Salle de Bal Brise, an ancient burial ground.

It appears that something is truly amiss beneath the surface here... Lumian sighed inwardly. He rose from his bed, donned his coat, and resolved to spend the night elsewhere to test his hypothesis.

Under the cover of darkness, with Salle de Bal Brise devoid of any illumination, Lumian followed the shadows along the roadside and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, its main entrance locked.

For Lumian, this posed no obstacle. He didn't try rousing the irritable Madame Fels by knocking on the door. Instead, he circled around to the side, traced the pipe, and climbed onto the balcony on the second floor.

In Room 207, Lumian slept until six in the morning. He experienced only two sporadic, ordinary dreams.

So, it was indeed the ancient bones buried deep beneath Salle de Bal Brise that triggered the residual powers of the Mystery Prying Glasses within me... Lumian sat up, a mixture of delight and disappointment washing over him.

His original plan was to use the Mystery Prying Glasses to create one or two supernatural paintings each day, accumulating them for future needs. However, it seemed that frequent use of the glasses was ill-advised. He would have to wait until the lingering negative effects dissipated before attempting further experiments. Otherwise, he risked something dreadful and bizarre happening over time, possibly leading to a strange demise akin to the Lawyer who had left the glasses behind, leaving behind only an eerie oil painting with enduring abnormal effects.

Tonight, I shall sleep within Salle de Bal Brise and ascertain whether the negative effects have dissipated... In the future, I must refrain from wearing the glasses more than twice in a brief span of time... These are the details Mr. K neglected to mention. Yes, I must experience them firsthand. Only through firsthand experience can I truly comprehend... Lumian rose energetically and made his way to the washroom to freshen up.

It being still early, many of the tenants were still abed, and the morning remained tranquil, devoid of the usual clamor over access to the washroom.
From time to time, Madame Fels would ascend the stairs to inspect the water meters on each floor, ensuring no one wasted the precious resource.
A contract had been inked between Auberge du Coq Doré and the Imperial Water Supply Company, stipulating a daily allowance of no less than 250 liters and no more than 500 liters of water. The cost amounted to 100 verl d'or per year.
Leisurely, Lumian strolled to the café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. He indulged in delectable treats like sablé cookies and brioche, a softer variation of croissants. Afterwards, he sought out a place for exercise.
Upon returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, he spotted Charlie, sporting a linen shirt and black trousers, seated on the steps outside the entrance, relishing a mouthful of meatloaf accompanied by an Apple Whiskey Sour.
"So early?" Lumian inquired, a smile playing on his lips.
Salle de Bal Brise closed its doors at 2 a.m., and the morning had yet to reach 8:30 a.m.
Uncertain whether to hastily rise and greet his employer or engage in the usual casual conversation, Charlie hesitated for a moment before standing up, a sheepish smile on his face.
"I think I'll catch a bit more sleep before heading back to the dance hall. I don't think I can keep doing this. I reckon there ought to be some time when we don't have to sleep or work. Otherwise, it feels, feels..."
Salle de Bal Brise opened at 10:30 a.m.
"Feels like we're mere machines built for work, devoid of a life to call our own?" Lumian finished Charlie's sentence, lending him a helping hand.
"Exactly! That's spot on!" Charlie agreed. "You're quite the refined individual, you know? Sometimes, you don't seem like a mobster at all. I mean, not like the leader of the Savoie Mob. You come across as more... civilized!"
Had everything gone according to plan, I would have been studying at a university in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. I would be spending time chatting with my classmates and exploring the depths of Underground Trier... Lumian's heart sank as he focused his attention on Charlie.
This was the method he used to observe whether Susanna Mattise's issue still lingered and when it would rear its head.
"W-What are you staring at?" Charlie stammered nervously. "Do

you see something amiss?"
Lumian eased his worry. His luck appears to be relatively normal and stable. He smiled, raising his right hand and giving a wave behind Charlie's back.
"Good morning, Susanna!"
Charlie spun around, eyes wide open, scrutinizing every detail.
A few seconds later, he exhaled and turned back, forcing a smile. He addressed Lumian, "You're just messing with me again."
That name remained a haunting nightmare he couldn't shake off anytime soon.
"I'm strengthening your mental endurance. This way, if something truly occurs, you won't panic and find yourself unable to devise a solution." Lumian earnestly patted Charlie's shoulder.
Moments before 10:30 a.m., Lumian made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise.
Upon his arrival, Louis and Sarkota approached simultaneously, their voices merging into one as they spoke. "Boss, something's up!"
"What's the matter?" Lumian inquired with a smile, seemingly oblivious to the anxiety and unease radiating from his two subordinates.
Louis glanced towards the staircase, lowering his voice. "Red Boots, Giant, and Rat are all here. It must be something serious."
Every leader present? Lumian pondered his recent actions and found it hard to believe that he hadn't offended all the leaders of the Savoie Mob.
I've been on my best behavior these past few days!
"Indeed," Louis confirmed with a solemn nod.
Lumian ascended the second-floor stairs nonchalantly, where Franca and the others awaited.
Franca had swapped her footwear for darker red boots. She sported light-colored pants and a trendy dark skirt that had gained popularity in Trier recently. Completing her ensemble was a more masculine formal attire.
With her right leg crossed over her left, Franca grinned at Lumian as he approached.
To her right was Baron Brignais, donned in a formal suit and top hat. On her left was a slender-faced man, barely reaching a height of 1.6 meters, boasting a pair of rat-like whiskers. He wore a dark brown shirt that fell short, and his thick, grayish-black hair framed his countenance. His dark blue eyes revealed a trace of anxiety.
"'Rat' Christo," Baron Brignais courteously introduced Lumian to the thin-faced man.
Baron Brignais then gestured towards the man seated opposite

him. "'Blood Palm' Black."
Black possessed brown hair, blue eyes, and a round face. He appeared to be in his early thirties and had a warm smile that hardly resembled that of a mob leader.
Clad in attire leaning more towards formality, his hands were large, with clearly defined bones beneath the surface. He held a slowly smoldering cigar.
"Good morning, everyone." Lumian dragged an armchair closer and settled in, positioning himself nearly a meter away from the table, assuming the air of someone in control.
"Giant" Simon glanced at him, took a drag from his cigarette, and exhaled a cloud of grayish-blue smoke.
"Christo met with some trouble and requires our assistance."
"What sort of trouble?" Lumian directed his gaze towards "Rat" Christo.
Christo played a vital role in Salle de Bal Brise's lucrative business. Despite the premium he charged for the smuggled liquor he peddled, its lack of taxation made it significantly cheaper than the wholesale liquor stores in Trier. Moreover, a substantial portion of the alcohol Christo dealt with was moonshine, cleverly adorned with labels from relatively renowned brands and origins.
Gritting his teeth, Christo, who bore a striking resemblance to a rat, spoke up.
"I've lost a shipment underground. The delivery men and escorts have vanished. Damn it, my younger brother was among them. His wife and child are in tears at my place!"
Something has transpired in Underground Trier? Smuggling operations are divided into carriers and armed protection? That's right. Osta Trul had mentioned helping others transport illicit books. Horse-drawn carriages are useless in Underground Trier; they rely solely on manual labor... Lumian nodded subtly and inquired, "What kind of goods?"
"A batch of red wine and brandy, along with some Blackfish." "Rat" Christo couldn't help but slam the table. "Damn it, we've taken that route countless times. Nothing ever happened, nor did we encounter those hyenas."
The term "hyenas" referred to the quarry police, who specialized in cracking down on smuggling activities and maintained order in the underground.
Observing Lumian's confusion, Baron Brignais casually explained, "'Blackfish' refers to firearms."
Among the mob's top five lucrative ventures, the bootleg alcohol supply chain ranked second. Firearms, due to low demand, brought in the least profit. The casino business, which was the

most lucrative, wasn't particularly favored in the market district, given the modest incomes of the local population. The money one could extract from the patrons was rather limited. Compared to gambling, which required wit, those who toiled all day preferred indulging in cheap liquor, gyrating their bodies, and seeking solace in the company of captivating dancers.

Regarding the sale of psychotropic drugs, the police department in Trier cracked down heavily on it. Following repeated warnings from the market district's police headquarters, Salle de Bal Brise had put an end to such incidents. However, Rue du Rossignol, overseen by "Giant" Simon, occasionally experienced a few cases.

Lumian turned to "Rat" Christo and spoke, "Any suspects?"

"None," Christo lamented. "Damn it, that route is incredibly well-concealed. Apart from me and my men, no one in the market district is aware of it."

He paused for a moment before sharing his intentions.

"I need your help to search for clues along that route, using your expertise. I've gone through it myself, but found nothing."

Without waiting for Lumian's response, Franca nodded and suggested, "Let's form pairs to ensure safety during the investigation.

"Right, I'll team up with Ciel. There's something I need to discuss with him."

"Giant" Simon's gaze flickered between Franca and Ciel a few times before he recalled that Ciel was suspected of sleeping with Franca's mistress, thus cuckolding her.

Seizing the opportunity to teach Ciel a lesson, "Giant" Simon nodded imperceptibly and said to "Blood Palm" Black, "You and I will be a team."

Baron Brignais then turned to "Rat" Christo. "I'll accompany you for your second trip."

After Baron Brignais and "Giant" Simon scoured the underground route to no avail, Lumian and Franca followed a smuggler into Underground Trier.

Chapter 186: Strange Footprints

Holding an iron-black carbide lamp, Franca glanced at the path between stone pillars and asked the smuggler, Fernandez, who was leading the way, in a state of confusion, "Doesn't this lead to Quartier de l'Observatoire?"

Though Underground Trier was a complex maze, the tunnels on this level had street names corresponding to the surface. After pondering for a moment, Franca realized they were going in the wrong direction.

Smuggling operations certainly entailed entering the city from its outskirts, and Quartier de l'Observatoire was positioned closer to the center of Trier compared to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. The district stood on the other side of the Srenzo River, effectively separating it from Avenue du Boulevard.

Fernandez, a smuggler associated with "Rat" Christo, turned around with a smile and explained, "The hidden route we're taking leads to Quartier de l'Observatoire. We always deliver the goods to the warehouse there."

"Is that so?" Franca slowed down and increased the distance between herself and Fernandez, who wore a brown felt hat.

Since they hadn't entered the smuggling route yet, she lowered her voice and conversed with Lumian.

"I remember you traded your Pugilist Beyonder characteristic for 18,000 verl d'or with Gardner. You know it's a Beyonder characteristic, right? Or rather, do you grasp a Beyonder characteristic's true meaning?"

"My sister mentioned it before." Lumian attributed his knowledge to Aurore.

Franca was tall and had long legs, making it effortless for her to keep up with Lumian.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she sighed and commented, "It's fortunate to have someone to guide you. In the past, we were stumbling around like blind mice, relying on ourselves to figure things out. Otherwise, I wouldn't have made the choice..."

Her voice trailed off, ending with a long sigh.

This reminded Lumian of a saying, either spoken by Aurore herself or relayed from Emperor Roselle's famous words: "Once you make a grave mistake, it will haunt you for a lifetime."

Franca quickly regained her composure and whispered to Lumian, "You've just entered the field of mysticism. Apart from knowledge, you're lacking much more.

"It's best not to be frugal with that sum of money. Use it to purchase a mystical item or a Beyonder weapon to compensate for

a Hunter's limitations in mysticism. Otherwise, if 'Black Scorpion' Roger truly seeks revenge against you, he won't need to go through much trouble. He can simply summon a few undead to hunt you down. If you have such intentions, I'll keep an eye out for you."
Lumian chuckled.
"I've already made a purchase."
"So quickly?" Franca nearly lost control of her voice, causing smuggler Fernandez to glance back.
The carbide lamps cast intersecting shadows, obstructing Lumian's view of Fernandez's expression. He couldn't discern what thoughts they triggered.
Lumian replied "honestly," "Before joining the Savoie Mob, I discovered a circle of Beyonders through Psychic's gathering of mysticism enthusiasts. There, I exchanged the verl d'or that the Boss gave me for a mystical item."
"No wonder..." Franca revealed a knowing expression and praised Lumian. "Your mind is even sharper than I imagined. Hmm, is it an item that enhances your mysticism abilities?"
Lumian spoke frankly, "A pair of Lawyer glasses, but they seem to have been tainted by some strange power."
As he spoke, he retrieved his brown Mystery Prying Glasses and showcased them. "They allow me to see things I usually can't..."
Franca's brow furrowed ever so slightly as she interrupted Lumian. "That's highly dangerous."
"I know," Lumian explained with a smile. "But as long as I choose the right environment and take precautions, it won't be too risky. Besides, it offers excellent disguises and mysticism techniques..."
Lumian briefly recounted his urge to paint after donning the Mystery Prying Glasses.
Franca's ponytail bobbed behind her head.
"It's certainly useful. If I were in your shoes, I'd make the same choice.
"Only the leaders and thugs of the Poison Spur Mob haven't really interacted with you. They only know you by your peculiar hair color. Otherwise, they would have recognized your true identity by now. They wouldn't have needed to act themselves. They could have sought revenge by sharing your information and wanted posters with the police headquarters and the two cathedrals."
Lumian chuckled.
"That's right. I can already set up a coffee meeting with Officer Everett."
Franca's vibrant lake-like eyes sparkled as she said, "You've shared so much with me about the mysticism gathering and your trump cards. Jenna even kept telling me how cunning and deceptive you

are. Yet, you're truly sincere and straightforward! Of course, our relationship is different from others. I knew it. Muggle's brother isn't that kind of person!"
For a moment, Lumian felt a twinge of guilt. He spoke sincerely, "Yes, she completely misunderstood me."
After chatting for a while, they finally reached the outskirts of Quartier de l'Observatoire's underground area and turned into a southward tunnel.
Soon, Fernandez halted in front of a secondary well belonging to an abandoned quarry.
He positioned the carbide lamp at the mouth of the well and gestured downward.
"Let's go in."
With the aid of the blue light, Lumian peered down into the depths of the well. It had been neglected for a long time and appeared to be completely blocked by gravel.
Using the recess in the well wall, ropes concealed in the shadows, and a basic iron ladder fastened to the moss, the three of them descended and swiftly reached the well's bottom.
Fernandez moved a few seemingly heavy rocks, revealing a narrow tunnel at the well's edge, wide enough for one person.
As they traversed the tunnel, which emitted a foul stench, the passageway ahead widened, as if they had entered another section of the quarry cave.
The air grew eerily still and darkness enveloped them. The cave ceiling was damp, with scarce traces of moss.
Lumian and Franca, each holding a carbide lamp, slowed their pace and meticulously examined the various signs along the smuggling route.
After an indeterminate amount of time, Fernandez pointed to a nearby tunnel.
"Our boss and Baron Brignais weren't entirely fruitless. They discovered that the caravan's tracks vanished into thin air over there."
It was a tunnel connecting two sections of the quarry cave. The path was strewn with rubble and potholes. In the distance, darkness prevailed, devoid of any light.
Lumian and Franca swiftly located the relatively fresh footprints that had abruptly vanished. They squatted down, closely examining them.
"Only footprints going in. The ones coming back end right here. Most people returning carry heavy loads. Their footprints are deeper, distinctly different from when they came... We can rule out the possibility of them turning around and retracing their

steps..." Lumian swiftly made a series of deductions.
Franca averted her gaze from her surroundings and stood up.
"No signs of a struggle. It's incredibly peculiar!"
She then motioned for Fernandez to move further away and wait in the quarry cave.
As Fernandez's carbide lamp glow faded into the distance, Franca produced a small makeup box and a white handkerchief with a blue checkered pattern.
The handkerchief belonged to "Rat" Christo's brother, Erkin, who had also gone missing during the smuggling operation.
Franca placed the carbide lamp down, opened the light-gold box, and ran her fingers over the mirror inside.
Meanwhile, holding the handkerchief, she repeated in a whisper, "Erkin's current whereabouts, Erkin's current whereabouts..."
The already dim tunnel grew even more stifling. The light from the two carbide lamps was pushed back by an invisible force, and the palm-sized mirror emitted a watery glow, as though revealing the depths of a dark river.
Before Lumian could count to three, a scene materialized on the mirror's surface.
Laborers lugging wooden crates and smugglers armed with revolvers and rifles trudged through the tunnel. As they progressed, the darkness behind them engulfed the space where the light had receded. Eventually, the carbide lamp's glow vanished from view, and the mirror's surface turned pitch-black.
"They did vanish in this area." Franca ended her divination, her thin red lips pressed together. "But I can't discern anything further."
Lumian didn't suggest trying the Mystery Prying Glasses. From his perspective, Trier's underground was a treacherous place, concealing all manner of secrets. There were ruins from the Fourth Epoch, foul-smelling old bones, catacombs with specific rules to follow, and the lingering Montsouris ghost that had defied eradication for years. They were all elements that instilled fear in those seeking the truth. If he were to use the Mystery Prying Glasses to survey the surroundings, there was a high chance he would explode on the spot.
In due time, Trier's underground would boast another legend entwined with the power of an evil god.
Therefore, Lumian would lend a hand out of consideration for the Savoie Mob's boss, but he wouldn't go all out and take unnecessary risks.
After all, it was "Rat" Christo who suffered the loss. What did it have to do with him, "Lion" Ciel?

Salle de Bal Brise still had an abundant supply of alcohol!
Franca glanced at him, not intending to make things difficult.
Red Boots stowed away the makeup box and Erkin's handkerchief, picked up the carbide lamp, and said to Lumian,
"Let's return and find Fernandez. Let him guide us forward. Perhaps there are other clues left behind."
"Alright." Lumian felt that Franca was merely fulfilling her duty as a member of the Savoie Mob.
The two turned around, carrying their carbide lamps, and ventured back toward the original quarry cave, plunging into the ever-deepening darkness.
After taking a dozen steps, Lumian abruptly halted, his expression growing grave.
"What's the matter?" Franca asked, perplexed.
Lumian's voice resonated with gravity as he directed her attention to the scattered rubble and pockmarked ground.
"No more footprints. The smugglers' tracks from their departure and our own as we crossed have vanished! But there's a trail of footprints carrying a heavy load leading forward!"
Franca's heart skipped a beat. She peered ahead, coming to the realization that the ground lay in disarray. The footprints left by her, Lumian, and Fernandez in the tunnel had vanished, replaced by the sudden reappearance of the missing caravan's tracks out of thin air!

Chapter 187: Shadow

"Dammit!" Franca exclaimed with frustration, her voice filled with intensity.

She scanned her surroundings, her mind racing as she pondered and speculated.

"Did we stumble upon the same thing that the missing caravan encountered? Entering that tunnel transported us to another world, erasing the original footprints? Did we vanish into thin air in Fernandez's eyes?"

Lumian had never faced such a situation before, nor had his sister Aurore written about anything similar in her novels. He couldn't make sense of what was happening.

Lost in thought, his brows furrowed, Lumian suddenly heard Franca's conjecture.

How imaginative... Lumian's initial reaction was a deep sigh before he contemplated the possibilities.

The more he considered it, the more he realized that Franca's words were eerily similar to their current predicament. He knelt down and examined the footprints once again.

"Indeed, the footprints suddenly appear with the weight of something heavy," Lumian said, gesturing to a dozen steps behind him.

That was the same spot they had previously traversed, yet there were no traces of their passage.

Franca clenched her teeth and spoke up.

"It seems we truly have entered another world. Or rather, an underground realm...

"Dammit it! Why did this happen to us? Christo, Brignais, Simon, and Black encountered nothing and safely returned to the surface!"

Uh... Lumian suddenly felt a twinge of guilt at Red Boots's questioning of destiny.

Crouched on the ground, he instinctively raised his hand and touched his left chest.

Was this somehow inevitable?

Yes, I can't dismiss the possibility that it's Franca's doing. Her Sequence is higher than mine, and she carries a mystical item that may hold some secrets... Lumian quickly gathered himself.

Franca looked down at her companion and muttered to herself, "Could it be linked to one of our Sequences? Alternatively, it might be the adverse effect of your glasses."

Lumian replied thoughtfully, "Hunter and Demoness are neighboring pathways."

In other words, if this problem stemmed from the convergence of

Beyonder attributes, the two of them couldn't escape responsibility. Of course, at Lumian and Franca's level, the convergence of Beyonder attributes wouldn't have such obvious effects. However, Lumian recalled encountering two Demonesses less than two weeks after arriving in Trier, and he was only a Sequence 8. He suspected that the power of Inevitability had transformed convergence into something fated to occur.

Hmm... Franca fell into deep thought.

After a few seconds, she clenched her teeth and spoke.

"Perhaps this encounter is truly a problem with our pathway, but why did Christo's smuggling caravan enter this space and mysteriously vanish in reality? They've traversed this route countless times without any issues. Why is it different now? Dammit! That blasted rat must not have spilled all the beans! He wasn't just smuggling alcohol and firearms this time. There's something else, something linked to mysticism?"

"That's not necessarily true. Emperor Roselle once said, 'Touch pitch and you shall be defiled.' Christo's smuggling caravan keeps going through this troublesome tunnel. Something was bound to happen, and unfortunately, it happened this time." Lumian rose to his feet, defending the infamous "Rat" Christo.

Franca was reluctantly swayed. She exhaled and said, "Now is not the time to dissect the cause. What matters is finding a way out. Sigh, why is Underground Trier intertwined with the abnormalities of the Hunter and Demoness pathways? Uh..."

Franca fell silent abruptly, as if recalling something.

"Have you figured something out?" Lumian stood up.

Franca pondered before responding.

"I don't know if your sister ever mentioned anything about the Fourth Epoch. Uh, she might not even be aware. In short, Trier during the Fourth Epoch served as the capital of the Tudor Dynasty, and the Blood Emperor who ruled the empire was likely a High Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway. Furthermore, the Demoness family of that era shared a certain connection with one or several prominent nobles of the Tudor Dynasty. It's reasonable for them to have left something behind in Trier."

"Demoness family?" Lumian was taken aback by the term.

Franca pursed her lips.

"In the Fourth Epoch, the Demoness pathway was under the control of a specific family. Sigh, since I chose the Assassin pathway, I could only do my best to gather relevant information, but I still lack substantial knowledge."

Lumian steered the conversation back on track.

"Do you suspect that this space is linked to the sunken Fourth

Epoch Trier?"
"Yes," Franca replied vaguely, not ruling out the possibility. She contemplated for a moment before adding, "The two Churches must have dealt with the ruins to some extent. If we can find the corresponding node, we should be able to escape."
Carrying the carbide lamp, Lumian once again examined the ground.
"Should we press on or turn back?
"Christo's smuggling caravan doesn't seem to have noticed anything amiss. They're still moving forward."
Franca pondered for a few seconds and said, "Let's go back to the spot where we entered this space and investigate. It's just a few steps away. We won't waste much time."
"Alright." Lumian walked toward the center of the tunnel.
Soon, he and Franca stood at the place where the smuggling caravan's tracks had materialized out of thin air, attempting to take a step forward.
There was no trace of footprints ahead.
After walking another dozen steps, the darkness deepened. Only Lumian's and Franca's footprints remained on the path.
They had not returned to reality.
"Wait." Franca raised her right hand, signaling to halt. "Let's turn back and head to the quarry cave we came from. We need to see if Fernandez has entered this space."
Lumian didn't object.
It could help them further determine the nature of the problem.
Guided by the bluish glow of their carbide lamps, Lumian and Franca followed the tracks left by the smuggling caravan.
Before long, they reached the quarry cave.
A figure stood at the boundary of light and darkness, with its back turned towards them.
Franca exclaimed with delight, "Fernandez!"
It seemed that the smuggler had also entered this space. Perhaps the problem didn't lie with her or Ciel!
However, Franca's expression tightened as soon as she finished speaking.
Simultaneously, Lumian spoke in a deep voice, "Something's off."
Fernandez, the smuggler, had been carrying a carbide lamp. There was no way he would just stand there in the darkness!
In the next moment, the figure turned around.
Under the illumination of Lumian and Franca's carbide lamps, a bloodied face came into view.
The man had short flaxen hair, thick brown eyebrows, and lake-blue eyes.

His lips were thin, and his appearance was unremarkable. Yet, his eyes radiated indescribable malice and hatred.
At that moment, sticky blood stained the man's face, as if it might drip at any moment.
It's not Fernandez! Why does he look familiar... Lumian assessed the situation as he reached for the black revolver concealed under his arm.
With a clang, Franca's carbide lamp fell to the ground.
Startled by the noise and the flickering light, the figure darted into the darkness and disappeared into a tunnel connecting to the cavern.
"What's wrong?" Lumian turned to Franca.
As a Sequence 7 Beyonder, a member of a secret organization, and an experienced combatant, she shouldn't be displaying such abnormal behavior and exaggerated reactions!
Franca gazed into the darkness for a few seconds before speaking, "That... that was my past self..."
Your past self, when you were still a man? Lumian was alarmed.
An unsettling feeling crept over him as he asked in a low voice, "You mean, before you drank the Witch potion?"
"Yes." Franca bent down and retrieved her carbide lamp, confusion and fear etched on her face. "I thought no one in this world would remember that face except for me... Why? Why am I seeing it here? Is it generated from my memories? Can't our memories be kept secret in this space?"
Wouldn't that be a good thing? Lumian's initial reaction was one of excitement.
If this space could reveal the hidden memories of his subconscious, he could begin piecing together the truth of the Cordu disaster!
As for whether this space might intrude on something it shouldn't and risk severe corruption and damage, he paid it no mind.
With his carbide lamp and revolver in hand, Lumian cautiously circled the empty quarry. He found no other figures or anything related to his past.
Disheartened, he expressed his disappointment to Franca, "I couldn't find my past self."
"Could it be that it's not a memory from the past, but rather something from the future?" Franca suggested returning to the secondary well that had brought them to this level. By searching for more anomalies along the way, they might be able to infer the nature of this space and find a way to leave.
Side by side, they traversed the quarry cave, following the footprints left by the smuggling caravan, heading towards the edge

of Quartier de l'Observatoire.
As time went on, Lumian and Franca noticed something on the ground almost simultaneously.
They were scattered droplets of blood, mingled with the disordered footprints of the smuggling caravan.
"Are the abnormalities starting to manifest?" Franca whispered.
Lumian nodded.
"If we proceed further, we might encounter those people." He glanced at Franca and added, "Although they may no longer be human."
Franca scoffed.
"Are you trying to frighten me? Do you think that will scare me? Whether they're corpses or monsters, it's within my expectations.
"Remember, the most terrifying thing in this world is the unknown."
Just as Franca finished speaking, Lumian's expression froze, illuminated by the glow of the carbide lamp.
"You're still trying to frighten me..." Before Franca could finish her sentence, she felt something warm sliding from her nose and falling to the ground.
It was a drop of bright red blood.

Chapter 188: Confidence

"Dammit!"

Franca couldn't help but blurt out her usual modal particle. With a quick swipe of her index finger across her nose, her hand revealed a bright red stain. The sight alone sent a shiver down her spine.

Franca snorted.

In an instant, black flames flickered in her nostrils, fingers, and the blood on the ground, swiftly vanishing into thin air.

Catching Lumian's gaze, Franca, slightly contorted from the pain, forced herself to enlighten him.

"We can't leave our blood in this unknown place. Otherwise, unimaginable horrors may unfold. Hey, why are you unharmed?"

From Franca's perspective, she surpassed Ciel in terms of Sequence and experience. There was no reason for him to emerge unscathed while she suffered!

"Perhaps I'm fine for now," Lumian patronizingly responded, pondering thoughtfully. "Maybe the shadow we encountered represented the old you, not the old me."

"So why did we come across the old me and not the old you?" Franca eyed Lumian suspiciously.

Could this bloke be hiding another secret?

Lumian pondered for a moment before answering.

"Perhaps this space is more intertwined with Demonesses."

"Could be..." Franca fell into deep contemplation.

After a few seconds, she pointed towards the footprints and blood droplets on the ground and suggested, "Let's catch up and investigate. The current condition of those people could reveal our future and help us prepare in advance."

Lumian responded with action, walking into the darkness that swallowed the footprints and blood droplets.

The yellowish-blue light of the carbide lamp quietly resisted the encroaching darkness.

As they tracked further, the abnormalities on their bodies became increasingly apparent. Warm blood began to trickle from Lumian's nose, while crimson liquid seeped from Franca's eyes, gums, skin, and ears.

With her black flames, not a drop of blood remained.

Finally, they "returned" to the secondary well, where the tracks of the smuggling caravan and the slowly congealing blood abruptly vanished.

Whether it was the tunnel leading to the secondary well or the path to other areas, there were no traces left.

"They vanished again?" Franca, her face enveloped in black flames,

frowned.
Lumian, his nose sealed by the black flames, took a deep breath and smiled.
"This might be our end. When the blood reaches a certain point, our bodies will gradually fade away."
Franca glanced at Lumian, who remained calm and composed, and clicked her tongue in admiration. "You've got a decent mindset."
Lumian chuckled.
"So what if I do? Too many negative emotions will only cloud my thinking."
"Sometimes, I reckon you're more mature than me." Franca sighed.
"Did you just figure that out?" Lumian naturally wouldn't mention that he was both sincerely pondering the issue and confident.
Compared to Cordu, trapped in an endless loop, at least there was no sign of terrifying power in this place!
Moreover, Lumian didn't need to rack his brain to come up with several escape strategies.
The first option was to take a risky move by using the Mystery Prying Glasses to explore the surroundings from different angles and locate an exit.
Secondly, he could try throwing out Mr. K's finger to establish a connection, hoping it would create a passageway.
Thirdly, summoning Madame Hela or the messenger of Madam Magician was another possibility. If it succeeded, it would mean that this place wasn't entirely cut off from the spirit world. The two ladies might have a way to forcefully extract Lumian and Franca.
Fourthly, if all else failed, he could set up an altar and offer prayers to the mysterious ruler beyond the gray fog. Such a bizarre space couldn't restrict a great entity. Even the cycle of fate orchestrated by the evil god couldn't shield them from His watchful eye, let alone this place.
Lastly, if the great entity remained unresponsive, Lumian could perform a ritual and beseech for a boon. He could activate the black thorn symbol on his chest, allowing the sealed evil god's corruption to amplify. This disruption might create a vulnerability in the workings of this space.
You can be as calm and composed as me when you have numerous untried methods and believe there's a high chance of escaping this place... Lumian criticized inwardly, feeling somewhat perplexed.
It felt like he had forgotten something important, but it eluded his memory momentarily.

Franca retrieved a light-gold makeup box, opened it, and placed it on the ground.
Her form swiftly faded away, leaving no trace behind.
The aqueous light within the palm-sized mirror flickered, illuminating Franca's figure.
How magical... Lumian sighed, marveling at the sight.
Franca glanced around within the mirror for a few seconds before vanishing.
She reappeared across from Lumian, shaking her head, and uttered, "I can't find a way out by relying on the mirror..."
Without awaiting Lumian's response, the Witch attempted several more methods, but all proved futile.
Finally, she caressed the mirror inside the makeup box, seeking guidance from her spirituality.
In such a place, she hesitated to perform Magic mirror divination, fearing a perilous and dreadful connection.
"The way out... The way out..." Franca repeated the divination phrase in Hermes several times, and the mirror darkened, resembling a moonlit lake.
The shimmering aqueous light reflected a figure.
It was Lumian—wearing a wide-brimmed round hat, a white shirt, a brown jacket, and dark pants. Black flames flickered subtly at his nose.
"Uh..." Franca turned around, looking at her companion by her side.
She furrowed her brow slightly and stated, "Finding the exit with your glasses? Isn't that too dangerous?"
Congratulations on finally uncovering the simplest among my five solutions... Lumian pondered and remarked, "This is no longer the true Underground Trier, nor does it seem to be directly linked to the ruins of the Fourth Epoch. As long as we protect ourselves, we should be able to endure any peril."
"Protect..." Franca repeated the word with a smile. "I happen to excel at that!"
With a swift motion of her right hand, she extinguished the black flames on Lumian's nose.
After a few seconds, a drop of bright red liquid trickled down, caught by Franca's open palm.
Then, she conjured fresh black flames, sealing Lumian's nostrils once again.
The mild burning sensation was tolerable for Alms Monk Lumian.
He asked cautiously, "What are you doing with my blood, a curse?"
Franca chuckled.
"Do I need to go through all this trouble just to kill you? I'll perform

a Mirror Substitution to shield you from the danger of using those glasses."
As she spoke, she retrieved a palm-sized mirror and smeared Lumian's blood upon it.
She has so many mirrors... Are they the essence of a Witch's spells? Lumian observed Franca's busy movements, enlightened and slightly envious.
Franca turned her head and addressed him, "Give me two strands of your hair."
Without hesitation, Lumian plucked two strands and handed them over.
A black flame appeared in Franca's hand, incinerating the golden strands.
She sprinkled the ashes onto the mirror's surface and stroked it with her black-flamed palm while murmuring an inaudible incantation.
When the black flames suddenly receded into the mirror, the traces of blood and hair vanished.
"Do not stray more than 30 meters away from me," Franca cautioned, holding the seemingly ordinary mirror.
Lumian nodded and retrieved the Mystery Prying Glasses from his pocket.
He placed the brown gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose, but his right hand remained gripping the mirror holder, ready to remove the glasses at a moment's notice.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian beheld a multitude of scenes:
Faces concealed in darkness, pallid and ferocious, drenched in blood.
A mass of dark hair floated amidst the shadows, comprised of hundreds or perhaps thousands of strands, extending in various directions.
Lingering figures, rock walls shimmering with aqueous light, and an impenetrable darkness.
In the pond-like puddle, a colossal, swollen, and pallid face lurked beneath the lightless surface, peering outward.
There was a glistening cave...
Light... Cave... Lumian's intuition instantaneously struck, compelling his dizzy mind to focus on the edge of the scene.
The luminous-filled cave rapidly enlarged, revealing a dimly lit passage beyond.
As the cave drew nearer, Lumian realized it was merely a reflection in a mirror. Its surface was solid and inaccessible.
The mirror sank to the depths of the lightless pool.
Suddenly, the colossal, swollen, and pallid face swiftly expanded

before Lumian's eyes, consuming his field of vision.
Lumian's sight darkened, and he nearly lost consciousness.
Vaguely, he "saw" his flesh attempting to depart from his skeleton.
Whack!
Lumian heard a crisp shattering sound, and his mind cleared.
He swiftly removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and retched.
After he regained his composure, Franca inquired with concern, "Are you alright?"
At some point, the mirror in her hand had shattered into countless fragments, scattered across the ground.
Lumian took a deep breath and replied, "I'm fine now."
He extended his finger, indicating a specific direction.
"Over a hundred meters from the tunnel, there lies a massive puddle. And at the puddle's depths, you'll find a mirror. That mirror reflects a cave, which leads to a path of light.
"However, be warned, for within that puddle lurks a perilous monster. I nearly died when I beheld its visage."
Franca listened in silence, her mutterings a mixture of confusion and frustration.
"Goddammit, could this place truly be connected to a Demoness?"

Chapter 189: Cooperation

Observing Lumian's perplexed gaze, Franca provided a succinct explanation, "One of the core abilities of the Demoness pathway revolves around mirrors and manipulating the world within them.
"When I suspected that this place might be connected to the Demoness or Hunter pathway, I pondered whether we inadvertently stepped into a certain location within the mirror world. Thus, I attempted to use the makeup mirror to see if I could escape through it. As you witnessed, it proved fruitless.
"Because of this, I have tentatively dismissed the notion of being in a mirror world or encountering a relic belonging to a Demoness. However, now we have stumbled upon a submerged mirror that likely conceals an exit..."
"So, you suspect that this is a specific place within the mirror world, restricted to certain mirrors?" Lumian attempted to grasp Franca's line of thinking.
"Exactly," Franca replied with a gentle nod. "But what perplexes me is how we found ourselves here without encountering anything resembling a mirror. Perhaps my conjecture is incorrect, or only partially true..."
Lumian pondered for a moment, hoping to glean some knowledge. He posed a sincere question: "What exactly is a mirror world?"
Franca grabbed the ponytail at the back of her head.
"Explaining it to you is a challenge since I am not entirely certain myself.
"Allow me to elucidate based on my understanding. In mysticism, mirrors possess distinct symbolic meanings, such as one's reflection or an entrance to another realm. The former suggests that we can use mirrors to create substitutes, while the latter alludes to a mirror world.
"It is often associated with terror, mystery, horror, and the bizarre. I cannot ascertain whether there are hidden elements or if it truly represents an alternate dimension. However, I do know that the mirror world connects to various mirror-like entities. It could potentially point to spaces that are typically inaccessible. As my Sequence progresses, I should be capable of utilizing the mirror world to swiftly traverse different locations."
Lumian recalled the recent events and allowed his imagination to run wild.
"Could the version of you we saw be a reflection left behind in the mirror world from a previous encounter, before you became a Witch? That would explain why I have never encountered my past self."

"That is a plausible explanation, but I haven't come across anything peculiar..." Franca deliberated for a moment. "If that is the case, we must hurry to the puddle immediately. The exit is most likely there! We can no longer afford to proceed cautiously or wait any longer. As I mentioned earlier, the mirror world harbors eerie and terrifying phenomena. If we linger here any further, I dread to imagine what might befall us!"
"Very well." Lumian maintained his composure.
Franca turned and sprinted, with Lumian closely following her.
As the Witch ran, it appeared as though she employed some form of ability. Small patches of frost materialized beneath her feet, causing a sharp reduction in friction. Her body seemed weightless as she gracefully glided through the dim quarry cave and into the depths of the underground tunnel.
Utilizing all his strength as a Hunter and Dancer, Lumian struggled to keep pace with Franca and avoid being left behind.
In the wintry chill, a thin layer of ice gradually formed on the walls of the surrounding rocks.
Upon the icy surface, visages stained with blood emerged. Their countenances contorted, eyes brimming with hatred, resembling vengeful specters emerging from the depths of hell.
Among them was the previous incarnation of Franca, when she still appeared as a man!
After sprinting for a while, Lumian and Franca caught sight of the puddle.
As the light from the carbide lamp cast its glow, the puddle's surface shimmered with a tinge of yellowish-blue.
"Is this it?" Franca halted abruptly.
Lumian examined it for a moment before responding, "Yes."
In that moment, every fiber of his being throbbed with pain, as if his body was on the brink of bursting, save for the fiery sensation in his nasal cavity.
Holding the carbide lamp tightly, Franca cautiously approached the puddle.
"The challenge now is how to elude the monster you encountered and locate the mirror. Regrettably, I cannot yet traverse between mirrors. I can only remain inside for a few fleeting seconds...
"I will divert its attention and keep it occupied for a while. Why don't you dive underwater and retrieve the mirror?"
Lumian spoke plainly, "I don't believe you stand a chance against it. It nearly overwhelmed me when I caught a glimpse of it."
"..." Though Franca felt a twinge of annoyance and frustration, she had to acknowledge that Lumian spoke the truth.
With her Sequence and mystical item, she could still hold her

ground even against a Beyonder one rank higher. However, judging by the monster's display, it far surpassed her by more than a single rank!
After a brief pause, Franca clenched her teeth and uttered,
"Even if I am outmatched, my skills in escape and self-preservation are formidable. I should be able to hold out against it for more than ten seconds. If you can retrieve the mirror within that timeframe, we can make our escape!"
Lumian let out a chuckle.
"We shouldn't risk our lives just yet.
"I have a plan to stall that monster for ten to twenty seconds without taking excessive risks. And I trust you can locate that mirror, correct?"
"I'm capable. I have a unique method of detecting mirrors," Franca eyed Lumian skeptically. "Are you truly up to the task? Is there genuinely no danger involved?"
"In theory, the risks are minimal," Lumian replied calmly.
Simultaneously, he silently added, If the risks prove too great, I'll find an alternative. Mr. K, Madame Hela, Madam Magician, the great being, and the power of Inevitability are all viable options.
Franca wasted no time and pursed her lips as she spoke, "Alright, just to be safe, I'll create a Mirror Substitute for you."
Naturally, Lumian had no objections to something that could effectively reduce the risk.
After Franca produced a small mirror and crafted the corresponding substitute, Lumian gripped the ritual silver dagger and encircled the pond-like puddle, creating a spiritual barrier.
Throughout the process, he maintained a distance of four to five meters from the water's edge, fearing the monster would drag him under.
Putting away the ritual silver dagger, Lumian turned to Franca with a genuine smile.
"What comes next involves one of my secrets. Could you turn around?"
"Very well." Franca was content with his straightforwardness.
She inwardly sighed once more.
Does Jenna misunderstand Ciel?
As Franca turned around, Lumian placed the carbide lamp aside and began the Summoning Dance.
He intended to summon the monster, but he wouldn't allow it to possess him!
Lumian believed that the higher the level of a peculiar creature, the more aware it would be of the corruption within his body. This made it less inclined to attach itself to him.

In other words, as long as he refrained from issuing commands that would influence the monster, it was likely to observe the Summoning Dance eagerly, waiting for an opportunity to attack. However, it was intimidated by the seal and the corruption and dared not act upon its thoughts. It would only truly engage him once the dance concluded.
The Summoning Dance lasted for 20 to 30 seconds, ample time for Franca to submerge herself and locate the mirror.
As long as Lumian could escape this world before the monster attacked, there would be no further issues!
Of course, if he couldn't harness the corresponding powers of nature in this place and allow the Summoning Dance to take effect, he could always employ an alternative method.
Amidst the contorted and frenzied dance, Lumian's spirituality stirred the forces of nature, forming a connection that dissipated into the surroundings, only to be obstructed by the spiritual barrier.
After a few seconds, ripples appeared on the surface of the puddle, and a pallid figure emerged, floating above the water.
It bore a resemblance to a human, with an inflated body and a gargantuan face occupying half its form.
The monster floated toward Lumian and came to a stop in close proximity.
Lumian dared not gaze directly at it. With his eyes half-shut, he called out, "Hurry!"
Without hesitation, Franca discarded the carbide lamp, took two steps, and leaped into the water.
With a splash, water splattered around.
A cold, damp sensation penetrated Franca's skin as near darkness enveloped her vision.
Guided by the faint glow of the carbide lamp seeping through the water, Franca swiftly descended to the depths.
Suddenly, dark creatures resembling seaweed extended their hair-like tendrils, slithering around Franca as if alive.
Franca paid them no mind and continued her descent.
Just as the "seaweed" was about to touch her, it unexpectedly burst into black flames.
The black flames burned silently underwater, showing no signs of extinguishing. The "seaweed" didn't turn to ash, but their consciousness was snuffed out.
They floated in the water, swaying with the currents.
Farther away, a multitude of seaweed continued to surge forward, obstructed by layers of condensed frost.
Beside the puddle, Lumian, engrossed in the Summoning Dance,

did not look at the monster. However, he heard a sound akin to a bubble popping. A putrid odor wafted towards him, accompanied by an enveloping chill.
An image flashed across Lumian's mind:
The bloated monster with its enormous face was less than a step away from him, almost clinging to his back. He could even perceive its "breath"!
Hiss... Lumian instinctively gasped, refusing to interrupt the Summoning Dance.
In the water, Franca, having dived deeper, finally sensed the presence of the mirror!
Her form suddenly faded, vanishing from her original position.
Franca's figure swiftly materialized on the ancient silver mirror resting silently on the seabed.
She retrieved the artifact and swam towards the surface, a look of joy adorning her face.
She had just confirmed that this mirror truly led to the underground tunnel in the outside world!
Beside the puddle, Lumian was filled with anxiety as he kept his gaze fixed on the water's surface. The Summoning Dance was nearing its end, and the bloated monster drew closer, its flesh almost brushing against his skin.
If Franca did not emerge soon, he would resort to using Mr. K's finger!
Just then, Franca reached the shore, holding the mirror, and leapt up amidst the splashing water.
Avoiding eye contact with the monster, she lowered her head and hurried to Lumian's side, gripping his wrist.
Simultaneously, both of them turned ethereal, while the ancient mirror clattered to the ground.
A scene unfolded upon the mirror's surface: Franca grasping Lumian's hand and leading him through a short, dark tunnel to an illuminated "cave" before leaping out.
Amidst flickering lights and shadows, Lumian realized he stood upon a dim path, with distant light seeping in.
Franca retrieved the mirror that had served as his substitute and noticed countless cracks marring its surface, on the verge of shattering.
"That was a close call." She sighed sincerely.

Chapter 190: Unexpected Development

Lumian glanced at the shattered mirror in Franca's hand, relief and confusion evident on his face.

"But I don't feel like I was being attacked."

His Summoning Dance still had five to six seconds left before Franca grabbed his wrist.

Franca cleared her throat and assumed the stance of a teacher.

"Some mysticism techniques are undetectable. The moment you feel attacked is the moment of your death."

Could it be that the monster secretly influenced me when I paused the Summoning Dance to enter the mirror for those brief seconds?

Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, the bleeding in that space caught us by surprise. We had no idea how to prevent it."

As he spoke, he looked at Franca's face and noticed her smooth skin, devoid of any scars. It was impossible to tell that blood had seeped out from multiple places.

Franca touched her face and pondered before saying, "It's indeed very bizarre. But we did lose some blood. As a Witch, I have a mystical perception of the amount of my blood. In other words, the damage we suffered in the special mirror world isn't fake. It's just that we didn't leave any wounds. Damn it, I didn't bring the carbide lamp!"

As she spoke, she turned around and searched through a pile of gravel on the side of the dim tunnel.

Lumian didn't have time to retrieve his carbide lamp either. He could only observe Franca's every move with the help of the distant light.

In less than ten seconds, Franca pulled out a mirror from the rubble.

The mirror appeared to be made of pure silver. The patterns on both sides were mysterious and sinister, and its surface was dark and lifeless, as if time had eroded it.

"As expected, there's a corresponding mirror in reality." Franca did her best to avoid being reflected in the silver mirror with its classic design. She also instructed Lumian, "In unsafe places or when encountering strange occurrences, try not to look into the mirror if you can. Otherwise, something terrifying might happen. We mustn't touch such mysterious and evil objects of unknown origin!"

Lumian, who hadn't mentioned to Franca that he couldn't look in the mirror after using the Mystery Prying Glasses to disguise himself, nodded.

"I understand that the exit is a mirror. What I can't figure out is how we entered that space without noticing. We didn't come across anything along the way."
"That baffles me too." Franca covered the surface of the classic-styled silver mirror with a handkerchief and other items. She stood up and said, "This thing seems to be closely related to the Demoness pathway. How about you give it to me? I'll find something valuable to compensate you later."
"No problem," Lumian chuckled. "You don't have to ask. I can't beat you."
Franca clicked her tongue and said, "No, the spoils of war must be distributed fairly. Otherwise, there will surely be conflicts within the team. I used to be taken advantage of like this in the past. If it weren't for my good nature and not holding grudges, I would have sought revenge long ago."
Why does it sound like you're cussing me, Madame... Lumian silently muttered.
If someone took his spoils and exploited him for no reason, and his strength was inferior to the other party, although he wouldn't say anything on the spot, he would definitely find a way to seek revenge later. He wouldn't simply "forgive" the other party so easily.
Stowing away the classic-styled silver mirror, Franca gestured toward the source of light.
"Let's go and have a look over there. We might come across the quarry police or other smugglers. We can ask for directions.
"Getting lost in Underground Trier and being unable to find a way out might be even more perilous than being trapped in that peculiar mirror world."
That's right... Lumian agreed wholeheartedly.
If it weren't for that, the Montsouris ghost would have been eradicated long ago by the official Beyonders.
The two of them proceeded through the tunnel, guided by the faint glow, staying alert for any potential attacks.
Before long, they reached a quarry cave. In the center of the cave stood a figure wearing a felt hat. The light emanated from the carbide lamp he held in his hand.
"Uh..." Franca recognized him and called out, "Fernandez!"
She realized that the figure was Fernandez, the smuggler who had been leading the way for them.
This appeared to be the quarry cave where they had arranged to meet him.
Fernandez turned around, surprised, and asked, "How did you come from there? I've been waiting for nearly half an hour, but

you didn't show up. I even went to the spot where the footprints vanished to search for you, but you were nowhere to be found."
Lumian and Franca exchanged glances and nodded.
Indeed, they had spent nearly half an hour in the special mirror world.
Franca approached Fernandez and casually explained, "We stumbled upon some clues and pursued them. However, we ended up circling back here and encountered an ambush on the way. We lost our carbide lamps."
"What clues?" Fernandez asked, pleasantly surprised.
Franca smiled.
"We'll discuss it with Christo directly."
Fernandez knew his place well and didn't pry any further. He led the two of them back along the same path they had taken before.
They ascended the secondary well and entered the underground section corresponding to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, finally arriving at the exit on Rue Anarchie.
Only when Lumian and Franca laid eyes on street peddlers, children picking up fruit peels, homeless people huddling in corners, and the bustling crowd, did they truly feel as though they had escaped from that strange realm and returned to the real world.
After boarding the carriage that "Rat" Christo had sent for them, Lumian glanced at Franca and asked in a low voice,
"What should we say later?"
Fernandez knew the carriage driver and had taken a seat beside him, so he wasn't in the carriage.
Franca chuckled.
"We'll simply say that we entered an unknown space, discovered some traces, and managed to escape using my mirror magic.
"The rest has nothing to do with Christo."
Lumian didn't say another word. He closed his eyes and recalled his encounters in the special mirror world.
The four-wheeled carriage swiftly turned onto Avenue du Marché, hurtling toward Suhit's steam locomotive. It veered into the alley that led to the depot.
"Rat" Christo awaited them in the nearby warehouse.
Before long, Lumian and Franca caught sight of the rat-like smuggler.
Christo approached them with a grin and exclaimed, "Thank you, by Steam! Erkin and the others are back!"
Erkin... Franca's eyes narrowed as she blurted out, "The missing caravan has returned?"
Erkin, Christo's younger brother responsible for the smuggling

caravan, had vanished previously, and Franca still had his divination handkerchief.
And now he's back?
*What the f*ck was going on?*
Christo nodded, still smiling.
"Indeed, the goods have returned as well!
"They arrived over an hour ago."
Over an hour ago? Wasn't that the same time when we discovered the spot where the footprints vanished and entered that peculiar mirror world? Lumian frowned, a hint of confusion stirring within him.
It was only because he had already experienced unbelievable phenomena like the time loop and the vivid dream that Lumian managed to keep his composure, unlike Franca.
Observing the surprised and perplexed expressions of Franca and Ciel, Christo smiled and stated, "I'll let Erkin explain it himself."
He turned and headed a few steps toward the entrance of the warehouse, calling out, "Erkin, come out for a moment!"
Seizing the opportunity, Franca tilted her head slightly and whispered to Lumian, "This is highly unusual..."
Lumian's lips curled into a smile as he lowered his voice and replied, "I even suspect that Rat and the others conspired to set a trap for us. They used the disappearance of the goods as bait to lure us underground into that perilous realm."
Franca studied him, amusement in her eyes, and remarked, "You don't have much trust in others, do you?"
Lumian spoke candidly, "The dancers' salaries make Giant and Baron Brignais resentful, and I possess the coveted Salle de Bal Brise. Only 'Rat' has no conflict of interest with us, so he was made to intervene."
Franca fell into deep thought, seriously considering the possibility of being deceived.
In that moment, Lumian grinned.
"This is merely a conjecture. It doesn't account for the footprints and other traces in the mirror world."
As soon as he finished speaking, a man who appeared to be under 30 years old emerged from the warehouse.
He was not particularly tall, standing at about 1.6 meters. Apart from the absence of rat-like whiskers, he bore a striking resemblance to Christo.
"It is indeed Erkin," Franca whispered to Lumian.
Then, she turned her gaze to Christo and Erkin, who were approaching together, and inquired, "Erkin, what happened?"
Erkin's dark-blue eyes revealed a blend of fear and joy.

"We entered a peculiar world within a section of the tunnel and couldn't find a way out. In the afternoon, while we were searching in all directions, we suddenly found ourselves back on our original path."
Did our entry provide them an opportunity to escape? Franca had a suspicion.
Lumian stared at Erkin, his expression devoid of any emotion, as if assessing an adversary who might bring him calamity.
In his mind, he recalled the droplets of blood left behind on the ground of the mirror world. Gradually, they coalesced, staining a whole area crimson.
Could someone who had lost so much blood truly return alive?
Franca had evidently pondered this as well. She regarded Erkin and asked, "What happened to you there?"
Erkin couldn't help but tremble.
"We started bleeding inexplicably. Towards the end, many were on the verge of death.
"By Steam, we managed to find the exit in time. As soon as we emerged, we recovered."
Is that so? Franca felt that Erkin, adorned with the Sacred Emblem, was relaying his account in line with her own experience and could be explained. Thus, she could only temporarily set aside her doubts.
Beside them, "Rat" Christo cast a glance their way and invited them with a smile,
"Regardless of the circumstances, I must express my gratitude. Would you like to sample the most authentic Savoie roast chicken?"
"Alright," Lumian responded on Franca's behalf.
Christo produced a set of keys and tossed them to his brother, Erkin.
"Go to my office and bring all the spices to the kitchen."
"Alright." Erkin received the key and ascended the iron stairs embedded in the outer wall of the warehouse. With his left hand, he inserted one of the keys into the door of Christo's office and turned it to unlock it.
Franca was momentarily taken aback before muttering to herself, "I recall that Erkin habitually uses his right hand..."
Why would he awkwardly open the door with his left hand when he wasn't holding anything?
Hearing Franca's remark, Christo nodded and replied, "Indeed, he is right-handed."

Chapter 191: Suspicions

Right hand... Franca's body jolted with a sudden shudder.

As a Witch, she was well-acquainted with the intricacies of mirrors, attuned to their peculiarities. And one thing she knew for certain was this: when a person gazed into a mirror, their reflection would be inverted from left to right.

The situation at hand was baffling. After Erkin, who habitually favored his right hand, had ventured into the enigmatic mirror world and returned, he had inexplicably switched to using his left hand. Franca and Lumian, however, had not experienced such a change.

What could this mean? Franca trembled with unease.

Just then, Christo reappeared at the warehouse's bottom floor, bellowing instructions to Erkin on the upper level. He demanded that Erkin retrieve his prized White Elixir wine. Seizing the opportunity, Lumian leaned in close to Franca and whispered into her ear,

"Have you noticed any connections?"

"You've thought of it too?" Franca replied, taken aback.

It was a challenge to detect Erkin's abnormality and grasp the underlying possibilities without extensive knowledge of mysticism and encounters with the Beyonder world.

Lumian continued in a hushed tone, "Judging by the amount of blood present in that space, I find it hard to believe that a regular person could have survived. From the start, I suspected something was amiss with Erkin and the other members of the caravan.

"Furthermore, you mentioned that the peculiar mirror world contains your past self—the reflection of who you once were.

"A mirrored image is left-right reversed in reality.

"Do you think the Erkin in the mirror has replaced the original Erkin?"

Franca fell into silence, pondering the implications.

"I dread to consider such a horrifying possibility, but the circumstances align more and more with your theory.

"I need to be certain."

As they conversed, Erkin descended from the warehouse's upper level, clutching a sack filled with various spices and two bottles of White Elixir wine. He made his way towards a nearby grayish-white, two-story building.

The structure served as a dining room and kitchen for "Rat" Christo's subordinates.

On the surface, Christo presented himself as a merchant. He owned multiple companies specializing in trade and providing

storage facilities.
Franca approached Christo with a solemn expression and asked, "Are you absolutely sure that is truly Erkin?"
Christo blurted out in surprise, "Why are you asking such a peculiar question? Of course, it's Erkin. By Steam, how could I not recognize my own brother?
"My kids are also quite fond of him. They find nothing unfamiliar about him."
Franca pondered for a moment before smiling faintly.
"I can't help but feel that something might go awry after venturing into that bizarre realm."
"I've checked on them. They're fine, just a bit weakened from the bleeding. Damn it, now I have to offer them some compensation. Why did Emperor Roselle have to introduce these bizarre notions, and why do so many people still remember them after nearly two centuries?" Christo's heart ached at the prospect of additional expenses.
Franca chuckled.
"You're not a Beyonder yet. Before you took over this smuggling business, didn't you anticipate that those above you would follow certain customs and pay extra for particular matters?"
Christo fell silent, uncertain of how to respond.
Franca then said, "I'll help you confirm whether anything is amiss with those individuals."
Franca retrieved her makeup box and Erkin's handkerchief, preparing to perform a divination in front of "Rat" Christo.
"Erkin's whereabouts. Erkin's whereabouts..."
As Franca chanted in Hermes, her eyes darkened, and she gently caressed the surface of the makeup mirror.
Lumian observed as the mirror shimmered with watery ripples of light.
Soon, a scene materialized within its depths: Erkin, dressed in a blue shirt, stood near the kitchen, engaged in conversation with the chef.
"I knew everything would go smoothly." "Rat" Christo chuckled.
He then gestured towards the warehouse.
"I have some matters to attend to. You can explore the area on your own or wait for me in the dining room."
Once the short-statured leader of the smugglers had entered the warehouse, Lumian turned to Franca.
"It appears that the real Erkin might be dead."
Thus, the divination results indicated the person who originally belonged to the mirror world.
"Do you still think something is amiss with Erkin and the others?"

Franca furrowed her brow.
"And if not?" Lumian laughed. "Should we cover our eyes and ears and pretend we didn't see, hear, or discover anything?"
Franca pondered for a moment before responding, "Perhaps, because I'm using mirror divination, it will be easier to pinpoint the individual within the mirror. I shall attempt another method."
Surveying the warehouse area, she picked up a short wooden stick and held it before her, pressing down from the top.
After uttering a similar divination statement, the wooden stick snapped, pointing directly at the grayish-white, two-story building that housed the kitchen and dining room.
Erkin was there.
Franca fell silent momentarily before declaring, "Let me see if that mirror can be of any assistance."
She referred to the classic-styled silver mirror that served as a gateway to the peculiar realm, hoping to employ it in banishing all the monsters that had emerged from within.
Lumian eagerly trailed behind Franca as they entered the dining room.
Their eyes were immediately drawn to a woman wearing a grayish-green dress. She appeared to be in her late twenties, holding the hands of a boy and a girl. Tears of joy streamed down her face as she embraced Erkin, who had just emerged from the kitchen.
"You're finally back!"
"Pépé!"
"Pépé, play with me!"
Amidst the clamor of excited voices, Erkin's face radiated sheer happiness. His brows and eyes reflected pure joy.
"..." Franca paused in her steps, silently observing the heartwarming family reunion for a long while.
Eventually, she let out a sigh and remarked, "Let's give it a little more time."
Lumian maintained his smile.
"Are you finding it hard to bear?"
Franca sighed.
"The real Erkin might already be dead. After all, this is his reflection.
"If I were to expose his true nature now, kill him, or force him back into the mirror, not only would his wife and children fail to show gratitude, but they would also despise me."
"You're right." Lumian chuckled. "In any case, if anything untoward happens in the future, whether someone lives or dies is not our concern. We simply need to exercise caution. Why should we

appear as the 'villains'? No one will thank you for it. Yes, let's avoid 'Rat' Christo and the others for the time being. If we don't encounter them, it's as if nothing has occurred."
Franca's inner conflict grew.
She didn't know what the mirror's reflection would do after replacing the person in reality.
What if his kindness morphed into cruelty, and his affection transformed into hatred?
Franca, unable to reach a decision, could only gaze at Lumian and sigh. "Your words are rather cold-hearted..."
She began to think that Jenna's assessment of Ciel held some truth.
"Madame, am I not merely following your inclinations to help you convince yourself?" Lumian responded, a mix of annoyance and amusement evident in his tone.
Franca offered a sheepish smile.
"How do you propose we handle this situation?"
Lumian glanced at Erkin, who was recounting his strange encounter to his wife and children as if it were someone else's story.
"We should have someone write a letter and report this matter to the police headquarters or a cathedral.
"The letter should merely state that 'Rat' Christo's brother, Erkin, ventured into an underground realm with a group of individuals and remained absent for the majority of the day. Upon resurfacing, their dominant hand had changed.
"Official Beyonders have encountered numerous anomalies, so they should be familiar with the underground. They will likely deduce what has befallen Erkin and his companions.
"As for how they handle it, that's their responsibility. We need not worry. If they refrain from harming Erkin and the others, the mirror person poses no threat. They can serve as replacements for the deceased originals. And if those monsters are eliminated, we won't have to confront pain and animosity, let alone compensate anyone.
"In short, we must trust the officials and the Church.
"Emperor Roselle once mentioned that a gentleman wouldn't feel inclined to dine on an animal they were familiar with after it had been slaughtered. However, if they remained unaware, it wouldn't be an issue. They could enjoy their meal blissfully. The same principle applies in this case."
Lumian couldn't recall the exact words, so he did his best to convey the sentiment in his own words.
Franca pondered deeply for a few moments before being

convinced.
"You're right..."
She glanced at Lumian.
"You don't sound like a mob leader at all."
"A true mob leader knows how to manipulate the authorities." Lumian grinned.
Franca chuckled and remarked, "Do I have to address you as 'Godfather' from now on?"
Without giving Lumian a chance to inquire further, she swiftly added, "A mob's godfather. Yes, for now, you don't have the means. I'll take responsibility for leaking the information to the officials."
Mob's godfather... Lumian had heard his sister mention this as the subject of her next book. He grasped the general idea, but couldn't help feeling a tad disheartened.
In the ensuing hours, he and Franca joyously attended a banquet hosted by "Rat" Christo, engaging in lively conversations with Erkin and the other smugglers.
Lumian couldn't stop raving about the delectable Savoie roasted chicken. It was seasoned with an array of spices, its surface glistening with a similar concoction. The golden skin boasted juiciness, tenderness, and an aromatic essence.
He sliced a piece of the crispy skin-covered meat and let it soak in the succulent juices for a moment before savoring it. The experience was pure bliss, rendering it impossible for him to cease indulging.
As the banquet drew to a close, Franca noticed only a handful of people remained at the dining table. She turned to "Rat" Christo, a smile playing on her lips.
"Come closer. I have something to ask you."
Christo, momentarily taken aback, shifted his chair nearer to Franca and responded with a smile, "And what's the matter?"
Franca smiled and whispered, "In truth, Ciel and I also ventured into that peculiar world. Fortunately, we managed to escape..."
With that, she swiftly produced the roast chicken's knife and drove it into the table in front of "Rat" Christo. Her voice turned icy as she interrogated him, "What's concealed within that shipment? You nearly got us killed!"
"I-I don't know!" Christo glanced around, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead.
Realizing that only he, Franca, and Cield remained at the table, he hastily explained, "I genuinely don't know. The boss instructed me to bring it to Trier!"

Chapter 192: Verification

Boss? Lumian was alarmed. He hadn't anticipated the connection to Gardner Martin, but now things were starting to make sense.

Why did the smuggling caravan vanish on a known route that had been used before?

And why was "Rat" Christo so eager to seek their help? If he had only lost a shipment, he would have made more confirmations. It would have taken time for him to reveal his vulnerabilities and mistakes to his peers, who might be eyeing his position.

Lumian's mind raced with thoughts.

Gardner Martin might be a Sequence 6 or 5 on the Hunter pathway. Both Franca and I entered the special mirror world, and we're a Hunter and a Demoness, respectively, on similar and neighboring paths.

Mr. K instructed me to approach Gardner Martin and gain his trust.

Franca, as a member of the secret organization Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, has quite a high Sequence. It's surprising that she's willing to be the mistress of a mob boss like Gardner Martin.

The boss of the Savoie Mob must be hiding a major secret or involved in something significant...

Why does he want Christo to smuggle an item related to the Hunter or Demoness pathway into Trier? And why go through the risks of underground smuggling? Is he afraid of the tax collectors? Instead, why doesn't the boss retrieve the item himself outside the city and have Christo get a smuggler lead the way? It would be safer and more discreet. Could it be that he knows the item might cause trouble and wants to avoid the risk? Lumian shifted his gaze from "Rat" Christo to Franca's face.

To Lumian's surprise, the Witch seemed unprepared for such an answer. Her initial shock was swiftly followed by a hint of excitement and joy.

She stared intently at "Rat" Christo and sneered, "Are you trying to f*cking deceive me? How come I haven't heard about Gardner asking you to bring something into Trier? Where is that thing?"

Excitement... Joy... Lumian grew increasingly certain that Franca had ulterior motives for joining the Savoie Mob and approaching Gardner Martin.

Christo forced a smile and responded, "It's in an iron box. I've already sent it to Rue des Fontaines. Perhaps the boss hasn't informed you yet."

As a seasoned member of the Savoie Mob, he knew the power

Franca possessed. She could easily dispatch him, especially since he wasn't prepared and hadn't brought any assistance. Moreover, she excelled in divination and could detect falsehoods.
"You better not be lying to me!" Franca recoiled, produced her makeup mirror, and began performing a divination in front of "Rat" Christo.
Lumian cooperatively stood up and walked to Christo's side. He reached out and firmly grasped Christo's shoulder.
Once Franca confirmed the truth through her divination, Lumian patted the "Rat" on the back with a smile.
"If anything similar happens in the future, make sure to remind me of any potential issues with the merchandise. I must be prepared for any unexpected incidents.
"Otherwise, I might just chop you into pieces and feed you to your beloved kids."
He had heard from Louis that "Rat" Christo had numerous pets and had a special fondness for dogs.
Fueled by the threat, Christo grew angry.
Franca may be the boss's mistress, and she's stronger than me. I can tolerate her treatment, but what right does a newbie like you have?
Recalling Margot and "Hammer" Ait, who were just as powerful as him, Christo wilted under their memory and forced a smile.
"The boss asked me to keep it a secret this time."
Franca stowed away her makeup box and cursed, "You son of a bitch! You could have at least given us a clue!"
Christo sheepishly smiled and replied, "Alright, alright."
Surprisingly, he wasn't at all offended by the insults. To him, dogs were cherished family members, so how could their mention be taken as an offense?
He often warned his lecherous subordinates that laying a hand on his wife was akin to touching his dog!
Observing Franca and Ciel's softened attitudes, Christo curiously asked, "Is that strange world really as Erkin described?"
Before Franca could respond, Lumian patted Christo's shoulder with a smile.
"Haven't you figured it out yet? Has a dog eaten your brain? We were just bluffing you!
"We didn't enter any strange world at all. We simply suspected something was amiss with your goods, considering the previous smooth smuggling operations and the sudden involvement of a Beyonder incident. So, we decided to deceive you!"
"..." "Rat" Christo couldn't help but feel vexed.
Indeed, if Franca and Ciel had truly entered a strange world, they

wouldn't have returned so swiftly!
Erkin and the others had been missing for hours!
How could he have been so foolish?
Why did he fall for their ruse?
Suppressing his emotions, Christo looked at Franca with a fawning smile.
"Please don't tell the boss that I revealed the existence of that item. He will not be pleased with me."
Franca cast a strange glance at Lumian and said to "Rat" Christo, "Fine. From now on, you owe me a favor."
"Alright!" Christo hastily agreed.
After bidding farewell to the leader of the smuggling operation, Lumian and Franca exited the warehouse and turned onto the narrow street of Avenue du Marché.
"I realized today that Christo is a complete fool. He's incredibly gullible," Franca remarked, breaking the silence as she glanced at Lumian beside her. There was a hint of a smile on her face, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You're quite skilled at deceiving others."
Lumian assumed a composed demeanor.
"In Cordu, you must have heard about Cordu, right? They call me the Prankster King."
Franca, familiar with Cordu due to the wanted poster, smiled at Lumian and responded,
"Did you lie to me earlier then? Heh heh, Jenna's assessment of you wasn't entirely off. You possess cunning and trickery."
"You're my sister's companion. I've been telling you the truth," Lumian said sincerely, maintaining an honest expression.
However, he didn't divulge the complete truth. Even if Franca were to confirm it through divination, she wouldn't detect any signs of deception.
Franca observed his expression and nodded in satisfaction.
"I am willing to trust Muggle's brother. Hmm... Let's pretend you don't know about Gardner's item. There are certain things that can be harmful if you were to uncover the truth. I won't inquire about it either."
"Alright," Lumian acquiesced, obediently playing the role he had assumed in front of Aurore.
The two then went their separate ways on Avenue du Marché. One headed towards Salle de Bal Brise, while the other turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches.
It was already past 8 p.m., and the sky had darkened. Gas wall lamps embedded in the walls illuminated the dance hall, casting a yellowish glow on the entire first floor. As they approached the

dance floor, the ambiance grew dimmer.
Amidst greetings, Lumian took a seat at the bar counter and ordered a glass of fennel and mint absinthe, known as Parrot.
The drink was rather invigorating, and with just one sip, it cleared his mind as if he had been slapped awake.
Lumian sat for a while, enjoying Jenna's risqué songs. Eventually, he noticed Charlie approaching the bar counter with a tray in hand.
"Ciel... Boss!" Charlie swiftly altered the way he addressed Lumian upon realizing it was the bartender looking at him.
Lumian took a sip of the psychedelic green liquid and asked with a smile,
"Do you prefer the dance hall or the underground bar in the motel?"
Charlie glanced at the bartender and the other waiters before lowering his voice.
"I still prefer the motel bar. Over there, I'm the center of attention!"
I can tell... Lumian chuckled and nodded towards the young female singer who had taken over from Jenna.
"Is she your friend's daughter?"
Charlie had previously mentioned a friend who had fallen victim to a loan shark. Pressured by Baron Brignais, the friend tragically committed suicide by jumping off a building, and now his daughter was forced to sing at Salle de Bal Brise.
"Yes," Charlie replied with a sorrowful expression.
The female singer, dressed glamorously in a revealing blouse and skirt, was around Jenna's age but lacked the same allure.
Upon closer observation, Lumian noticed the key distinction between the two:
Jenna's eyes radiated a certain spark, whereas despite her fake smile, the light in the other singer's eyes was absent.
Charlie opened his mouth, seemingly hesitant to ask for something, but in the end, he decided against it and remained silent.
Lumian took another sip of the Parrot and immersed himself in deep thought, the song playing in the background.
Approaching 10:30 p.m., he stood up and made his way back upstairs. He changed into a worn linen shirt, an old jacket, brown pants, and topped it off with a dark blue cap.
With this appearance, he resembled a vagabond.
Without hesitation, Lumian pushed open the window and leaped into the alley behind the dance hall.
His intention was to pay a visit to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

His Prophecy Spell had revealed that Monsieur Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, would be present at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons between 11 p.m. and 12 p.m. this Friday, i.e., tonight.
Lumian wasn't expecting to confront the matter involving the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, single-handedly. He had no intention of facing them head-on. Instead, he aimed to gather valuable information and uncover more problems through observation.
To him, the most crucial objective was to utilize Monsieur Ive and the others to locate the place where Susanna Mattise had resided during her lifetime and obtain an item she had carried for a significant period. This would lay the groundwork for the Exorcism Spell when she eventually launched an attack.
Although completing the ritualistic magic in time might prove challenging, being prepared was preferable to being caught off guard.
After taking a few detours, Lumian arrived outside Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Since it was not yet 11 p.m., he saw no need to rush inside. Instead, he found a corner and settled down, observing Monsieur Ive's beige six-story apartment with the demeanor of a genuine tramp.
Before long, Lumian spotted the landlord.
Monsieur Ive returned from Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, holding a black cane. He wore a faded dark suit, chestnut pants, and an aged half top hat.
A few minutes later, a dim light emanated from one of the windows of his apartment.
Lumian patiently waited.
As he waited, his brow gradually furrowed.
Why hasn't Monsieur Ive made his way to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? It's already past 11 p.m.
The window continued to emit a yellowish glow, and occasional figures passed by.
Fifteen minutes elapsed, yet Monsieur Ive had not left his apartment, crossed Avenue du Marché, and entered Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Lumian couldn't help but mutter to himself, *Could there be an error in my Prophecy Spell?*

Chapter 193: Luck Enhancement

Lumian waited patiently until midnight drew near. As the clock struck 11:30 p.m., the light in Ive's room went out, yet no one emerged from the apartment. It seemed the miser had decided to save on gas bills and retired for the night. The final act of the play at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons concluded as midnight approached. The audience trickled out one by one, but no one entered the theater.

Lumian muttered to himself, his thoughts racing: Could it be that the Prophecy Spell's answer isn't precise enough? After all, the ritualistic magic was cast by me. It's understandable that its effect isn't perfect. Yes, that's a possibility. But what if the Prophecy Spell is accurate?

Alarmed amidst his thoughts, Lumian's head snapped in the direction of the door adorned with theater posters.

If the Prophecy Spell was correct, it meant that Monsieur Ive had indeed been at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons between 11 p.m. and midnight.

And if Monsieur Ive truly had been there, who was the identical figure who had entered the apartment and never left?

There was a strong chance it was a decoy!

A decoy!

No way... Lumian couldn't fathom his own suspicion.

How could he be deceived by such a trick, especially after meeting and conversing with Monsieur Ive before?

He was more inclined to believe that the Prophecy Spell was flawed.

Perhaps there's a tunnel beneath the apartment leading to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? Lumian pondered, searching for a plausible explanation.

Trier was a city where establishing a tunnel was easier than in other places. It only required a short excavation to connect to underground passageways and sewers. However, such tunnels were also prone to discovery. The Underground Trier teemed with people—quarry police patrolled the area, smugglers traveled through, and planters passed by. Unless the tunnel went deeper or had a cleverly hidden entrance, it wouldn't take long for it to be found.

If Monsieur Ive's apartment did have a similar tunnel, he wouldn't have needed to venture out to the nearby Underground Trier entrance at night.

In the midst of these thoughts, Lumian recalled two important details.

Firstly, he had "witnessed" a change in Monsieur Ive's luck when they first met. The next day, he realized that luck had inexplicably altered.
Secondly, Monsieur Ive possessed Beyonder powers and had a high likelihood of being a believer in the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire. Despite having a low Sequence, when the official Beyonders brought him in for questioning, they found nothing amiss.
Combining these perplexing facts with the disparity between the Prophecy Spell and reality, Lumian's pupils contracted as he muttered to himself:
A decoy, could it be real?
Was the person residing in the opposite apartment all this time after the robbery a mere decoy?
Is that why his luck changed and the official Beyonders failed to detect anything wrong?
How is it possible for him to resemble Monsieur Ive so perfectly? Did he employ a mystical item akin to the Mystery Prying Glasses or some other method? And where is the real Monsieur Ive hiding in Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? The more Lumian pondered, the more unnerved he became.
No one had discovered the substitution that took place.
At the very least, Christo's men showed signs of mirror-like reversal.
The situation is growing increasingly sinister, befitting a follower of an evil god. Lumian sighed deeply.
From the assortment of the pervert's abilities, Lumian had already deduced that Monsieur Ive had sensed something awry after being "robbed." After all, even a single verl d'or held value as money. No robber would willingly discard it. And if it had truly been discarded, it meant that the robbery was not the true objective. It was understandable, then, that Monsieur Ive had prepared himself to conceal his secrets from the official Beyonders. Lumian simply hadn't anticipated such a bizarre method.
He had actually fashioned a doppelgänger identical to Monsieur Ive!
For a moment, Lumian couldn't ascertain whether the decoy in the apartment was an ordinary person adorned with Beyonder cosmetics or a devotee of the evil god with extraordinary powers.
If it was the former, Lumian desired to seize the opportunity in the dead of night, apprehend the decoy, administer a thorough thrashing, and extract the truth. Then, he would deliver the decoy to the police headquarters or a cathedral, leaving the official Beyonders to conclude matters.
If it was the latter, he dared not act impulsively. No one knew the

decoy's Sequence level or the breadth of its abilities.
Lumian turned his head once more, casting a glance at the brick-red, three-story building housing Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. He noted that no more patrons emerged from its entrance, dispelling his idea of venturing inside for another look.
The final performance of the day had concluded!
After contemplating for a while, Lumian resolved to make some preparations.
He rose slowly to his feet and proceeded toward Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, skulking in the shadows untouched by the glow of the gas street lamps.
Along the way, he scrutinized the vagabonds slumbering in the corners of the roadside, his gaze deep and earnest.
Finally, he found a suitable target.
Huddled beneath a makeshift barricade in the alley, the vagabond's clothing was tattered and stained with mud. His legs bore the marks of dog bites, festering wounds oozing yellow pus.
In Lumian's eyes, this individual was plagued by misfortune. He would face a series of calamities in the next two or three days, with his very life potentially at stake.
This made him the ideal "material" for the Luck Enhancement Spell!
Yes, Lumian intended to employ the ritualistic magic of the Alms Monk—the Luck Enhancement Spell—to fashion an item capable of transmitting ill fortune.
If the fake Monsieur Ive were to be plagued by misfortune, continually beset by various predicaments, there was a high likelihood that he would reveal his predicament to the official Beyonders!
With this in mind, Lumian had been on the lookout for the most hapless vagabonds. This particular group belonged to the realm of ill-fated individuals.
With his cap pulled low, Lumian approached the vagabond, positioning himself so the gas lamps on the street cast his face in shadows.
He crouched down, black-gloved hands ready, and gently prodded the tramp.
"You..." The tramp stirred, his voice filled with pain and confusion.
"I need your assistance with something. Willing to lend a hand?" Lumian produced a silver coin, worth one verl d'or, adorned with cherubs and intricate lines.
The tramp's eyes were immediately drawn to the gleaming coin. Without hesitation, he nodded and replied, "No problem!"
As he spoke, he extended his hand, already imagining the aroma

of Apple Whiskey Sour and hearty meatloaf.
Once the silver coin was in his palm, the tramp's eyes widened suddenly, fixated on something behind Lumian. He blurted out in shock, "That's..."
Seizing the moment Lumian turned his head, the tramp swiftly pushed himself up, attempting to vault over the barricade and sprint down the alley.
It was evident that giving money to a vagabond and enlisting his cooperation in something posed a clear danger!
For an ordinary tramp, the logical choice was to accept the money and make a run for it!
Whack!
Lumian swiftly withdrew his right hand, calmly observing as the tramp slumped against the barricade, unconscious.
From the start, Lumian had no intention of allowing the tramp to witness everything while awake. Even if he were blindfolded and his ears blocked, there was still a risk of danger. Moreover, there was the potential for revealing Lumian's identity and the sinister ritualistic magic known as the Luck Enhancement Spell.
Hence, his plan had been to seek the tramp's consent and then render him unconscious.
Lumian assisted the tramp to his feet, as if supporting a drunken companion, and guided him to the nearest entrance to Underground Trier. Finding a concealed spot nearby, he secured the tramp, binding his hands and feet, blindfolding him, and muffling his ears.
Once everything was in place, he stealthily returned to Salle de Bal Brise, retrieving a carbide lamp and the necessary tools.
Without delay, he went back to the entrance, carefully lifting the unconscious tramp and making his way to the quarry cave where he had previously performed the Prophecy Spell.
This time, however, the ritual had undergone a change. While it remained a dualistic ceremony, the orange candle representing a deity and other supplicants had been replaced with one of a grayish-white hue.
It still contained Lumian's blood.
To enhance his chances of success, Lumian intended to utilize the ritualistic magic to "pray" to the corruption sealed within his chest, mobilizing a fragment of its power.
After constructing the altar and erecting a wall of spirituality, he plunged Hedsey's tainted dagger into the tramp, allowing his blood to flow into a metal vial.
The tramp stirred, only to be swiftly rendered unconscious once again.

Lumian disinfected and bandaged the wound, blending the blood with ash from his own hair to create an ink-like substance. Using the thinnest paintbrush at his disposal, he meticulously outlined a series of intricate and enigmatic symbols on faux goatskin parchment.

The design consisted of interwoven black thorns forming a ring, snakes with entwined heads and tails, a river composed of these serpentine figures, distorted lines, a peculiar eye, and more.

By the time he completed a fraction of the intricate work, Lumian's forehead was drenched in a sheen of cold sweat.

He positioned the tramp and the faux goatskin adorned with symbols upon the boulder that served as the altar. Dripping perfume into the flames and sprinkling powder, Lumian took two steps back, fixing his gaze upon the gently flickering yellow candle flame, and uttered ancient Hermes words:

"Power of Inevitability!

"You are the past, the present, and the future;

"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

As before, the flame of the deity's candle compressed to its utmost limits before expanding, swelling to the size of a clenched fist. Its hue transformed to a silvery-black shade, distorting everything in its vicinity. Gray mist filled the air, and a tempest of darkness whirled about.

Lumian, his ears assailed by frenzied murmurs, endured the vertigo and switched to the Hermes tongue.

"I implore you,

"I implore you to alter this destitute man's fate.

"I pray that you will take away his misfortune."

At this juncture, Lumian took a step forward and ignited the faux goatskin adorned with mysterious symbols using the silver-black candle flame. Placing it within a natural crevice on the altar's surface, he observed as the parchment began to smolder.

In the next instant, he produced a gold coin worth five verl d'or, engraved with the Sunbird, and positioned it near the tramp's outstretched hand.

To those gripped by greed, money was an irresistible lure. It served as the optimal conduit!

Lumian, burdened by a sensation akin to carrying a weight of over five hundred kilograms, retreated a step, awaiting the consumption of the smoldering faux goatskin before commencing the final incantation.

"Gray amber, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation..."

The entire altar abruptly ignited, assuming an ethereal semblance.

Before Lumian, an illusory, intricate, and chilling river of mercury silently coursed its way.

It enshrouded the tramp and the gold coin, amplifying the murmurs in Lumian's ears and causing the cyan veins upon his face to bulge.

Instinctively, Lumian recoiled from the agony of supplicating for a boon. Suddenly, the illusory image shrank, descending upon the surface of the gold coin resting upon the altar.

Everything returned to its former state, except for the gold coin, which now appeared dimmer under the silver-black illumination.

Chapter 194: Triggered

At the sight of this, Lumian hastily concluded the ritual and extinguished the candles in the proper sequence.

The frenzied ravings that had filled his ears vanished, and the searing pain abruptly ceased before it could overwhelm him.

Once he tidied up the altar in a rough manner, Lumian shifted his gaze to the 5 verl d'or coin.

It no longer appeared peculiar. Bathed in the glow of the carbide lamp, it shimmered with a captivating golden sheen, indistinguishable from any other coin.

Lumian's eyes darkened suddenly, as if he were observing a living being, examining its fortune.

Normally, he couldn't "see" an object's fate, but this time was different. After focusing, he realized that the gold coin was enveloped in black vapor tinged with a hint of blood-red glow.

The former symbolized ill fortune, while the latter indicated a degree of impending catastrophe.

Phew... Lumian let out a sigh of relief.

This meant that the Luck Enhancement Spell had succeeded. The tramp's streak of misfortune for the next few days had been transferred to the gold coin!

However, if Lumian didn't find another person to bear this fate within three days, it would revert to the tramp, permanently untransferable.

Lumian continued to gaze at the tramp for a few more seconds, confirming that his luck had temporarily returned to normal, neither good nor bad.

Satisfied, Lumian, already positioned at the edge of the altar, reached out and picked up the 5 verl d'or, which served as the medium for luck transference.

He wasn't concerned that this act would transfer the misfortune attached to the item onto himself. That's because activating the Luck Enhancement Spell required specific conditions:

Firstly, the recipient had to willingly accept the gold coin and subjectively desire to possess it.

Secondly, throughout the entire process, the recipient had to exploit a situation they shouldn't have.

In other words, if Lumian used the gold coin to make a purchase, the shopkeeper wouldn't suffer any ill luck merely because they accepted the item—unless they sold Lumian something counterfeit or dishonestly manipulated the transaction for illicit gain.

Likewise, if Lumian discreetly slipped the gold coin into Charlie's pocket without his immediate awareness, Charlie wouldn't

encounter misfortune when he eventually used it.
As the original owner of the coin, Lumian naturally remained unaffected by the Luck Enhancement Spell when he retrieved it.
The two straightforward methods to trigger the Luck Enhancement Spell were to keep the coin in his pocket and allow the target to steal it. He could also feign leaving it behind so the target could pick it up.
Lumian believed that unless individuals like Monsieur Ive, who had acquired a miserly habit, underwent a significant transformation, they would still harbor an enduring fondness for money. Falling into such a trap would be easy for them.
After erasing various traces on the altar, he hoisted the tramp onto his back and ascended to the surface. He dumped him back into the alley where he had been found, removing the ropes binding his hands and feet, along with the cloth covering his eyes and ears.
Observing the tramp's condition, Lumian gave him a swift kick and departed.
The tramp stirred slowly, uttering pleas of desperate fear, "Please, let me go!"
He blinked his eyes open, instinctively scanning his surroundings. To his realization, there was no one in sight, and he found himself still slumbering in his usual spot.
"..." The tramp fell silent.
As his senses gradually returned, his initial reaction was to delve into his pocket.
A chill seeped into his mind, and with a gleeful expression, he retrieved a silver coin worth 1 verl d'or.
It's still here!
It's really still there!
It wasn't a dream!
Under the faint crimson moonlight casting its glow from above and the street lamps illuminating the vicinity, the tramp fiddled with the silver coin repeatedly, assuring himself that it wasn't a counterfeit.
Only then did he recall to examine his body.
Soon, he noticed that his arm was bandaged, and a sharp ache assaulted his mind.
Apart from that, there was nothing out of the ordinary.
The tramp stumbled to his feet, rubbing his backside as he muttered to himself, "It's not that kind of pervert..."
Having witnessed the world prior to his bankruptcy, he was aware that Trier housed its fair share of peculiar individuals. Consequently, various private organizations had sprung up. Some advocated that men and women existed solely for reproduction,

while others believed that true love only blossomed between men. Gatherings even catered to those who believed that women alone held the secret to loving their own kind.
The tramp had initially suspected he had fallen victim to men with a peculiar fixation on foul, unwashed men. However, it seemed that wasn't the case.
After pondering for a moment, he conjectured that someone had taken an interest in his blood and extracted some. The 1 verl d'or was his reward.
He had heard tales before of influential figures relying on continual blood transfusions to sustain their lives.
"At least there's 1 verl d'or." The tramp instantly rejoiced, no longer dwelling on the loss of blood.
He even entertained the hope that the other party would seek him out once more. When the time came, he would willingly inquire about their desired price.
...
Lumian relied on a copper coin toss to decide that he would spend the night at Auberge du Coq Doré. Consequently, he returned to Room 207 and slept until 6 a.m.
After having breakfast and engaging in some outdoor exercises, then returning to the motel, changing his attire, and disguising himself, Lumian prepared to set off for Avenue du Marché to find the two cleaning ladies already hard at work.
Lumian caught sight of a cleaning lady in her fifties, sporting a vibrant golden wig and makeup, as she diligently cleared the trash in the lobby. Lumian halted his steps and asked contemplatively, "You're Elodie, aren't you?"
He recalled Charlie mentioning her name.
"Yes, Monsieur Ciel." Elodie straightened her posture.
She wore an old yet clean grayish-white dress and stood at an average height of 1.65 meters. From her facial features, it was evident that she had been quite attractive in her youth.
"You know me?" Lumian inquired nonchalantly.
Elodie answered truthfully, "Monsieur Charlie Collent spoke of you before. He mentioned that you're the hotel's guardian."
Heh heh, just as expected of Charlie... That's the right attitude. No trace of inferiority or fear... Lumian started to feel that Elodie, the cleaning lady, wasn't a former street girl as Charlie had speculated.
He casually asked, "I heard from Charlie that you used to be a theater actress?"
"Yes." A smile graced Elodie's face. "I performed in two theaters, taking on supporting roles. However, one of them went bankrupt,

and the other stopped hiring me for some reason. I was already quite old by then."
As she reminisced about the past, a hint of melancholy appeared in her demeanor.
Lumian nodded and glanced towards the motel door.
"Have you heard of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?"
This was the question he was truly interested in.
This cleaning lady named Elodie was originally a theater actress, but she had been hired by Monsieur Ive, the motel landlord who had a close relationship with Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. It was a little suspicious.
Elodie's expression became animated.
"I know that their plays are splendid. The actors possess remarkable acting skills. It's worth saving up for a month just to purchase tickets to their shows.
"When I attended a performance at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, I discovered that they were in need of a cleaning lady for half a day. That's why I ended up here."
I see... It seems unrelated to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons or Monsieur Ive... Lumian refrained from further probing to avoid raising any suspicions. He smiled and remarked, "Seems like you have other jobs?"
Elodie believed that Monsieur Ciel sought to ascertain the cleaning lady's background to protect the motel's interests, so she responded honestly, "Every day from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., I work at a factory south of the market district. It's called the Goodville Chemical Factory, situated on Rue Saint-Hilaire."
Rue Saint-Hilaire ran alongside Trier's city walls and neighbored the factories in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
Trier's factories had preserved a practice from the era of Roselle. If production continued around the clock, the workers were divided into three shifts: one for the morning to noon, another for the afternoon to evening, and the final one for the night.
"That sounds demanding." Lumian sighed.
Elodie smiled and spoke gently, "I have two children who are nearly grown. Once they secure their own jobs, I won't have to toil so relentlessly."
"What about your husband?" Lumian casually inquired.
Elodie's expression darkened.
"He died in a factory accident a few years ago."
Lumian didn't pry further. Instead, he engaged in conversation with another cleaning lady, faithfully fulfilling his duties as the protector of Auberge du Coq Doré.
Exiting Rue Anarchie, Lumian stepped onto Avenue du Marché,

making his way towards Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
He wasn't intentionally waiting for Monsieur Ive, who was suspected of being a decoy. His intention was simply to observe. His primary objective was to keep a close watch on the individuals heading to 126 Avenue du Marché.
The Prophecy Spell had revealed to him that he would cross paths with Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché. "Hammer" Ait had mentioned that Louis Lund would once again seek out the boss of the Poison Spur Mob, "Black Scorpion" Roger, this Saturday or Sunday, and "Black Scorpion" Roger resided at 126 Avenue du Marché.
With this combination of information, Lumian had decided to become a "permanent resident" on Avenue du Marché on Monday and wander about in hopes of encountering his target.
As Lumian neared Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and Monsieur Ive's apartment, he slowed his pace. Sometimes, he sat among the tramps, while other times, he visited a nearby café for a drink.
Since he was already there, it was only natural for him to keep an eye out for Monsieur Ive. After all, this was Avenue du Marché as well.
After nearly 45 minutes, Lumian finally spotted the landlord of the motel.
Clad in a faded formal suit, a worn-out top hat, and a black cane that was on the verge of losing its paint, Monsieur Ive emerged from the apartment and made his way towards the Suhit steam locomotive station.
Lumian gradually stood up and glanced behind him. He feigned terror and jogged, as if he were being pursued by an enemy.
In his attempt to overtake Monsieur Ive from behind, he accidentally collided with him.
A clatter ensued as a golden coin fell to the ground, yet Lumian seemed oblivious to it. He lowered his head and fled in a panic.
Monsieur Ive grumbled, his gaze suddenly drawn to the golden coin on the pavement.
Subconsciously, he wanted to call out to the impolite individual, but as he extended his hand, no words escaped his lips.
Swiftly scanning his surroundings, he swiftly squatted down and retrieved the 5-verl d'or coin. Nonchalantly, he slipped it into his pocket, as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired.

Chapter 195: Candidate

Hidden behind the shadow of an ebony street lamp, a mere twenty meters away from Monsieur Ive, Lumian leaned discreetly, tugging his cap lower amidst the bustling crowd. He watched intently as his mark retrieved the glistening gold coin, secretively stashing it away.

Only then did Lumian release a sigh of relief. With one hand nonchalantly tucked inside his pocket, he strolled towards 126 Avenue du Marché, paying no further heed to the dubious decoy, for the Luck Enhancement Spell had been officially set in motion, impervious to interruption.

However, the spell required time to manifest its effects. Within half a day or, at most, a full day, misfortune would incessantly plague the false Monsieur Ive. Lumian need only orchestrate a small incident when the opportune moment arrived, and the chances were high that Monsieur Ive would inadvertently unveil his peculiar nature to the legitimate Beyonders.

As Lumian ventured forth, he soon realized that 126 Avenue du Marché was none other than the abode of "Black Scorpion" Roger, the very nerve center of the Poison Spur Mob. Consequently, he dared not approach too closely, wary of exposing himself. Settling himself near a café window, diagonally positioned at a distance of over ten meters, he ordered a Fermo coffee and a dariole.

While awaiting his refreshments, Lumian attentively scanned the passersby on Avenue du Marché, his gaze lingering upon the promotional posters adorning the café's walls.

A prevalent theme among them was the impending National Convention elections scheduled to commence on Sunday.

There were three contenders vying for the position: Matthew Boulanger, representing the National Party; Hugues Artois, championing the Enlightenment Party; and Jacques Sanson, hailing from the Revolutionary Party.

As Lumian observed the fervor surrounding the approach to 126 Avenue du Marché, he found himself engrossed in the manifestos of the candidates.

Matthew Boulanger, the incumbent parliament member for the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district, advocated for the restoration of Intis's former glory. His rallying cry was "Make Intis Glorious Again." Boulanger attributed the nation's current predicaments to its defeat in the recent war against the Loen Kingdom. His proposed solution entailed reorganizing the Intis army with a renewed focus on prioritizing Intis's interests. He sought to regain the advantages relinquished in the Southern

Continent, bolster the economy, and transform the marketplace district.
Boulanger believed that the process of "Making Intis Glorious Again" would bestow upon the denizens of the marketplace district an abundance of employment opportunities, enabling them to amass wealth, whether through venturing into the Southern Continent, enlisting in the army, or capitalizing on foreign trade.
Hugues Artois, a candidate gaining considerable popularity of late, advocated for "More Jobs, For A Fairer Society." His pledge was to invigorate the economy, constructing additional factories in the southern region of the marketplace district, while simultaneously dismantling the shackles that bound factory owners, bankers, financiers, and merchants. However, his intentions also encompassed challenging the privileges enjoyed by the Church and the affluent, imposing heavier taxes upon them.
Jacques Sanson, a member of the Revolutionary Party, shared Hugues Artois's conviction that societal privileges had no place in the modern world. Regardless of one's affiliation with the Church or financial benefits, Sanson believed that everyone should pay equal taxes.
He boldly asserted that the current tariff policies hindered Intis's progress, particularly the city walls and the 54 checkpoints surrounding Trier. Sanson advocated for the free circulation of goods and the establishment of a liberated market, which would lead to the proliferation of factories and a significant increase in tax revenue. By taxing the privileged class alongside these reforms, the national treasury would swiftly recover from any initial setbacks.
When the time came, Sanson planned to explore the implementation of Emperor Roselle's envisioned annuity guarantee system, providing essential protection to the workers in the marketplace district.
His slogan resounded, "Take Down Those Damned Walls!"
Having finished reading the candidates' platforms, Lumian couldn't help but feel inclined to vote for Jacques Sanson.
While it remained uncertain whether Sanson possessed the capability to realize his ideas, cheaper alcohol and goods would bring tangible benefits and security to the people in the marketplace district.
As for taxing the privileged, they weren't overly concerned, as long as the burden didn't exceed a coppet.
Yet, it was evident that Jacques Sanson faced discrimination. His campaign posters were relegated to the farthest corners, barely visible. This treatment stemmed from the Revolutionary Party's

perennial status as a minority within the National Convention.
As the Poison Spur Mob rallied behind Hugues Artois of the Enlightenment Party, Lumian directed his utmost attention towards this candidate. He not only perused Artois's election platform but also scrutinized his color photographs.
Artois, a man in his thirties, possessed a luxuriant head of black, fluffy hair with hints of gray at his temples. His nose stood tall and proud, complemented by deep blue eyes. His height commanded attention, and he exuded an air of refinement when dressed formally.
I can't allow this man to be elected... Unless I dismantle the Poison Spur Mob before that happens. However, the Mob still enjoys the mysterious support of Madame Moon. Even if one Black Scorpion falls, another Red Scorpion will emerge... Yes, the elections are set to commence this Sunday. The police headquarters, military police, and official Beyonders will be mobilized to vigilantly monitor each constituency. Causing trouble won't be easy... Should I involve the laborers, porters, and waiters of the Savoie Mob? Lumian contemplated how to secure the National Convention seat for both Matthew Boulanger and Jacques Sanson.
According to Intis law, anyone residing in a constituency for at least six months and having a job or attending university possessed the right to register and vote in that district. Lumian himself had only arrived in Trier less than a month.
Lost in thought, he maintained a watchful eye on the window, hoping to catch sight of Louis Lund.
After a considerable time had passed, the golden sun ascended into the sky. Lumian realized that waiting was not a viable option.
Firstly, his identity posed a problem. He remained under the intense scrutiny of the Poison Spur Mob, preventing him from waiting in a building opposite "Black Scorpion" Roger's residence. Such a vantage point would limit his view and increase the risk of overlooking crucial details.
Secondly, as the leader of the Savoie Mob, he had numerous responsibilities to fulfill and required moments of respite. Waiting 24 hours a day for two straight days was simply unfeasible.
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian was struck by an idea.
Why should I do it myself when I have so many subordinates and even hired Anthony Reid with my own money?
With that thought, Lumian rose from his seat and left the café, making his way towards Salle de Bal Brise.
As he reached the middle of Avenue du Marché, Lumian's attention was drawn to a gathering by the roadside. At the outskirts of the

crowd stood a circle of black-uniformed police officers, while two rows of mounted officers observed the passersby.
Amidst the 200 to 300 people, there stood a makeshift wooden platform. A man in a black suit, sans bow tie, commanded the stage.
A massive poster displaying his photo adorned the outer wall of the house behind him. His resounding voice resonated through the streets.
"We need jobs. We need better income...
"I will construct more factories on Rue Saint-Hilaire...
"I pledge tax concessions for these factories..."
Ah, isn't that Monsieur Hugues Artois? Lumian, utilizing his above-average Intis height, could clearly see the speaker on the wooden stage.
It was the elegant, black-haired, blue-eyed Hugues Artois, a candidate supported by the Poison Spur Mob!
Lumian listened for several seconds, his gaze instinctively scanning the upper levels of the building opposite Hugues Artois, examining the windows and roof.
As expected, he detected signs of police officers or individuals who clearly did not belong to the household.
He's well-protected indeed... I cannot shoot Hugues Artois in the head or chest from those positions using a rifle... Lumian averted his gaze, a tinge of regret washing over him.
There was another way to ensure Hugues Artois's defeat in the election, and that was to prevent him from participating altogether.
Those who perished would automatically forfeit their right to run!
Lumian had seriously contemplated the feasibility of this plan while at the café, but he concluded that it would stir up too much chaos. The market district mobs would likely be mobilized and used as scapegoats. He himself would fall into that category. If that happened, his true identity would likely be exposed, compelling him to flee the market district, if not Trier altogether. He would lose the opportunity to track down Madame Pualis and the padre.
Assassinating the candidate appeared to be quite a challenge. Even if he were fortunate enough to succeed, escape might not be guaranteed.
Lumian shifted his gaze to the people standing behind the wooden platform. They were most likely members of Hugues Artois's campaign—a trio of men and two women.
Among them, there was a woman with fiery red hair, rumored to possess noble lineage. Her features were striking, with chiseled lines on her face, yet there was an overall air of neutrality to her

beauty.
Tall and attired in a white and brown hunting suit, she was accompanied by four other individuals.
Fearful of missing Louis Lund, Lumian paid no heed to Hugues Artois's oration. He withdrew from the throng and made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise.
Noontime brought few patrons to the establishment. Some waiters and bartenders took a break, while others busied themselves with tidying up.
Addressing Louis and Sarkota, Lumian spoke up. "Dispatch four men to keep watch at 126 Avenue du Marché."
"126..." Louis repeated, his voice filled with astonishment. "Isn't that 'Black Scorpion' Roger's residence?"
Is the boss planning to stir up trouble for the Poison Spur Mob once again?
Lumian nodded, his expression candid.
"You've got it. Don't get too close and ensure you remain undetected. Stand guard from different vantage points and observe whether he appears among the passersby."
Lumian gestured toward the wanted posters adorning the wall, as well as Louis Lund, who stood nearby.
Since joining the Savoie Mob, Louis's own wanted poster had been discreetly moved to an even more inconspicuous spot.
Louis and Sarkota turned their attention to the wanted poster, carefully examining its contents. Words like "Cordu Village" caught their eye.
They grasped the general idea and readily agreed.
"Yes, Boss."
Once the four mobsters departed Salle de Bal Brise with the wanted poster in tow, Lumian turned to Louis and Sarkota.
"For the next few days, your task will be to maintain order on the first-floor dance hall."
Having issued his instructions, Lumian added nonchalantly, "I just caught snippets of Hugues Artois's speech. Not bad. Hmm... Whom does our Savoie Mob support as the market district's member of parliament?"
Louis cast a quick glance around and lowered his voice.
"The baron mentioned that he intends to vote for Monsieur Artois."

Hugues Artois? Lumian never anticipated such a response.

Did the competing Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob really endorse the same candidate?

If Hugues Artois succeeded, would he assist the Poison Spur Mob in dealing with the Savoie Mob? Or would he aid the Savoie Mob in completely overthrowing the Poison Spur Mob? Or would he demand peace between the two factions?

The more Lumian pondered it, the more he sensed that something was amiss.

If the influential figure behind both the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob was none other than Hugues Artois, then the two sides wouldn't have become bitter enemies to this extent!

Though Lumian played his part, wasn't he acting under the blessings of the Boss and Baron Brignais?

Furthermore, Hugues Artois wasn't an elected member of parliament. What authority did he have to protect both the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob?

The only plausible explanation was the machinations of the Enlightenment Party, but it made no sense for them to incite two rival mobs to fight each other to the death.

Lumian, lacking experience in this area, failed to find an answer even after considerable thought. All he could do was sigh with regret.

I can't employ the Savoie Mob's men to secretly intimidate voters into not supporting Hugues Artois!

He glanced at Louis, his confusion evident as he asked, "Why was I unaware that our Savoie Mob is backing Hugues Artois?"

Louis immediately grew tense.

"I assumed the baron had apprised you, Boss."

Wasn't that the purpose of the handover?

Baron Brignais was in a foul mood after losing the Salle de Bal Brise, so he couldn't be bothered to inform me about many things. In any case, I'll find out when I need to know? Lumian mumbled inwardly as he departed from Salle de Bal Brise and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

He proceeded directly to the third floor and made his way to Room 5, the dwelling of Anthony Reid, the information broker. Extending his hand, Lumian knocked on the wooden door.

Knocks reverberated, yet no response came.

He must not be present... That makes sense. How can an information broker stay holed up at home all the time... Lumian retrieved a note and fountain pen he carried with him and wrote

on the note, using Anthony Reid's door as a surface:
"I've received intel that Louis Lund will be seen on Avenue du Marché from Saturday to Sunday. Keep a close watch on him. As soon as you spot him, notify me without delay. You can find me either in Room 207 at the motel or at Salle de Bal Brise. The agreed payment will be made promptly when the time comes.
"Ciel."
After sliding the note through the crevice of Room 305's door, Lumian returned to Salle de Bal Brise and settled in the café, patiently awaiting feedback.
As twilight descended, a gangster positioned near 126 Avenue du Marché dashed back to the dance hall, racing up to the second floor.
Has Louis Lund been discovered? Lumian rose from his seat, eyeing his subordinate.
The mobster appeared inexplicably anxious, as if a famished lion had set its sights on him.
Without waiting for Lumian to inquire, he stammered in haste, "Boss, th-this is bad! I saw, I saw a group of police officers heading toward the depot!"
The depot? Isn't that under the boss's ownership? Ah, near the depot lies the warehouse belonging to "Rat" Christo... Could Franca's "report" have taken effect? Lumian swiftly contemplated a possibility.
This left him disheartened.
In his eyes, the mirror people and any potential harm they might bring couldn't hold a candle to a single strand of Louis Lund's hair!
Suppressing his emotions and residual excitement, Lumian spoke to his subordinate, "Understood. I'll handle it. Return to your original post and remain vigilant for the person depicted in the wanted poster. In half an hour, I'll send four others to relieve you."
"Yes, Boss." The gangster heaved a sigh of relief and made his way downstairs.
As Lumian watched him disappear, he gazed down at his trembling hands.
They still quivered slightly.
It was a result of the sudden surge of exhilaration he experienced when he thought his subordinate had brought news of Louis Lund.
At times, my emotional stability wavers... Fortunately, I have another psychiatric session scheduled for this Sunday... Lumian sighed inwardly, taking a seat and savoring his coffee.
In order to welcome Louis Lund in his finest state, he had refrained from ordering alcohol.
...

Outside the warehouses belonging to "Rat" Christo.
He, along with his subordinates and the porters, had gathered together, encircled by 20 to 30 armed police officers donning black uniforms.
Christo forced a fawning smile and addressed Superintendent Travis Everett, saying, "Monsieur Superintendent, why have you suddenly surrounded the warehouses? I'm a legitimate businessman!"
Everett, a man in his thirties with black-framed glasses and a broad chin, regarded Christo and spoke in a deep voice, "Do not assume that we are unaware of your usual dealings. We are not dealing with you because you abide by the rules and know what is permissible. Your only choice now is to cooperate with us and aid us in unraveling this as swiftly as possible."
Christo detected a glimmer of hope in Superintendent Everett's words and nodded.
"Alright, alright, no problem!"
He had already distributed the batch of goods from yesterday. As long as the genuine account books were not discovered, there was no concrete evidence to accuse him.
With his short black hair, Everett turned to the man standing beside him and said, "Monsieur Deputy Assistant Commissioner, you may proceed."
The man had a rugged appearance, sporting fluffy blond hair, golden eyebrows, and a beard. He wore a slightly smaller black police uniform, but his buttons were crafted from gold.
Adorning his epaulet was a silver-white seven-petal scented iris, accompanied by an off-white diamond square.
This emblem indicated the rank of Deputy Assistant Commissioner.
The police department in Trier had four ranks, in ascending order: Chief Superintendent, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner, and Deputy Commissioner.
Of these, there was only one Deputy Commissioner—the head of Trier's police department. Across the entire Intis Republic, the minister of the National Police Department, a Commissioner, held a higher rank.
The Assistant Commissioner and Deputy Assistant Commissioner served as Trier's Police Department's Deputy Minister and Police Committee members. Their epaulets displayed off-white diamond squares beside the seven-petaled irises. There were four Commissioners, three Deputy Commissioners, two Assistant Commissioners, and one Deputy Assistant Commissioner, with no Chief Superintendents.

In other words, this uncouth man with blond hair and a golden beard held an equal rank to Aymerck, the Police Committee member in charge of the entire Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. However, Christo was entirely unfamiliar with him.
"Just call me Angoulême," the rugged Deputy Assistant Commissioner replied succinctly.
His gaze swept across Christo, Erkin, and the others, inexplicably making them feel as if they were staring at the blinding sun, forcing them to lower their heads.
Angoulême averted his gaze and instructed the plain-clothes team behind him, "You may bring that object forward now."
Two team members approached the nearby four-wheeled carriage and unveiled a wide, flat, and sizable object covered in a black velvet curtain.
They positioned the object beside Angoulême.
Angoulême locked eyes with "Rat" Christo and the others, subtly raising his chin, and uttered,
"Line up in front of me, one by one."
Christo sensed the kid in his pocket trembling visibly. He surmised that Angoulême was an official Beyonder, someone of considerable power.
After a few moments of contemplation, he approached Angoulême fearfully, not daring to resist.
Suddenly, Angoulême pulled open the black velvet curtain, revealing the complete appearance of the object beside him.
It was a full-body mirror, simple and unadorned, mounted on a stand of rusted iron-black.
Christo's reflection appeared instantly in the mirror, capturing every detail.
Christo remained unaware of anything amiss, but Erkin's expression underwent a drastic change behind him.
Erkin abruptly turned to the left, attempting to escape.
Almost 20 others followed suit, including laborers and porters.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
Angoulême's team had already prepared, raising their arms and squeezing the triggers.
Bullets struck those fleeing, but it was as if they struck an illusion, passing through them and landing in the distance.
Angoulême calmly extended his left hand and adjusted the position of the full-body mirror beside him.
The mirror reflected Erkin's figure against a dark background.
Erkin froze in place, maintaining his running posture.
In an instant, he was drawn towards the full-body mirror, a look of horror etched on his face.

As soon as the two collided, Erkin's body vanished.
In the blink of an eye, he reappeared in the mirror, his face stained with blood. His expression turned sinister, consumed by hatred and resentment.
He opened his mouth as if to scream, but an invisible force pulled him into the unnaturally dark backdrop of the mirror, and he vanished.
Witnessing this, Christo stood dumbfounded, forgetting to aid his brother.
One thought echoed in his mind: There's something terribly wrong with them...
Meanwhile, Angoulême's subordinates worked to control the fleeing individuals. The ordinary people caught in the midst of the chaos cowered on the ground, heads lowered, trembling with fear.
...
In Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian sat at the bar counter, listening to Jenna's captivating singing. Two hours ago, he had received news that "Rat" Christo was unharmed, but a group of his subordinates had perished.
Quite efficient... Lumian inwardly commended the official Beyonders in the market district.
As the risqué song came to an end, a woman who had been waiting on the sidelines took the stage and hurriedly approached a young band member. She sobbed and cried out twice.
It seemed she was delivering news of someone's death.
The band member stood frozen, shocked by the news, unable to react for a moment.
After a few seconds, he flung aside the six-string zither strapped to him and dashed off the stage.
However, he only managed a few steps before he stumbled and fell heavily to the ground. He struggled to rise but failed.
In the next moment, tears streamed down his face.
Jenna, adorned in a shimmering red dress, observed him for a few seconds before pressing her lips together. Eventually, she didn't offer consolation, allowing the band member and the grieving woman to weep.
She quietly stepped down from the stage and crossed paths with Lumian, who had left the bar counter.
"What happened?" Lumian inquired.
Jenna let out a soft sigh and replied, "His father passed away in an accident a few hours ago. I know him. Learning to play a musical instrument hasn't been easy for him. His father works as a porter, and his mother is a dishwasher. Without their unwavering support, he would be limited to manual labor..."

An accident a few hours ago... A porter... Lumian roughly pieced together the cause.
He gazed silently at the stage.

Chapter 197: Helper

After the band member and his mother got time off from René, Salle de Bal Brise's manager, the drumbeats reverberated through the air, signaling the start of a new round of dancing.

Lumian turned his gaze to Jenna, who stood by his side, and spoke in a casual tone.

"I thought you would offer him some comfort. After all, you know him well and often collaborate with their band."

Jenna, dressed in a stunning red sequined dress that revealed a generous amount of her chest, pressed her lips together and responded calmly.

"In that moment just now, what he needed wasn't comforting words but a release. Offering condolences would only worsen his pain."

Lumian scrutinized Jenna for a few moments.

"You seem to understand it quite well. Why do I have a feeling that you've experienced something similar yourself?"

Jenna lowered her gaze to her toes and smiled softly.

"A few years ago, I went through the same thing when my father passed away.

"One day, before dawn, my mother took me to the rooftop of our apartment and stayed with me until the sunrise. I witnessed the gradual brightening of the sky, from pitch black to a deep blue. It grew lighter and lighter, and I saw the clouds adorned with shades of bright gold and other colors.

"In that moment, she told me that darkness would eventually pass, and the sun would rise. Light would always find its way to illuminate the land.

"When he returns to the band, I'll find an opportunity to share something similar with him."

Lumian listened in silence, letting out a sigh. "You have a wonderful mother."

"Yes." Jenna accepted the compliment with pride.

Lumian chuckled and remarked, "You managed to say so much without resorting to curses. That's unlike you."

Moreover, she appeared rather refined.

"Damnit! Do you think I'm the type of person who curses incessantly?" Jenna cursed indignantly and made her way to the break room to prepare for the next song.

Lumian settled back at the bar counter, his mind preoccupied with another matter.

He had therapy scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, and there was a possibility of Louis Lund showing up on Sunday.

What if he missed it?

Lumian's initial impulse was to write a letter to Madam Magician and request her to check with his psychiatrist, Madam Susie, about the possibility of rescheduling the treatment by a day. However, he couldn't shake off the feeling of his condition being unstable for the past two days. If he didn't act promptly, he might face severe consequences when tracking down Louis Lund.

Even though Madame Pualis wasn't exactly Madame Night, Lumian couldn't confront her directly. His primary objective was to locate the survivor from Cordu and engage in a friendly conversation with her.

Lumian didn't hold much animosity towards Madame Pualis. While she believed in an evil god and had involvement in Cordu, it appeared that she wasn't responsible for the disaster. She had departed before the ritual took place under some compulsion.

Lumian didn't concern himself with others' beliefs, nor did he intend to.

Hence, if he allowed himself to become unstable and reacted impulsively, escalating the conflict with Madame Pualis and making her his enemy, matters would become exceedingly troublesome, and he might even lose his life.

As for the dispute with the Poison Spur Mob, a problem with Madame Moon didn't equate to matters involving Madame Night.

After careful consideration, Lumian devised a plan to find someone who could track Louis Lund on his behalf and follow him to his residence in Trier.

There's no need to consider individuals without Beyonder powers. They simply wouldn't be able to keep up with him.

There are two viable options. The first is Anthony Reid, an information broker suspected of being a Beyonder from the Psychiatrist pathway. He possesses excellent tracking abilities and has already accepted my commission, receiving a deposit. Since the task involves locating Louis Lund, it naturally falls within the scope of the mission. If Anthony proves difficult, I'm prepared to offer more money.

The second option is Franca. She, along with Aurore, belongs to the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Franca knows my true identity and displays a certain level of concern for me. She is trustworthy to some extent, not to mention that she still owes me a favor. Franca possesses enough power to tail Louis Lund and even intercept him if necessary. As these thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, he rose from his seat, making his way to the bedroom on the second floor and leaving Salle de Bal Brise through the window.

...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 305.
Lumian knocked on the wooden door.
"Please come in," Anthony Reid responded in a West Midseashire Coast accent.
The door slowly swung open.
The information broker stood before Lumian once more.
His plump face, once slick with oiliness, appeared freshly scrubbed, enhancing his air of honesty.
Wearing a grayish-blue worker's uniform, he seemed to have spent the entire day in the southern part of the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
"I've read your note," Anthony Reid said, running a hand through his receding light-yellow hairline. "I've been keeping an eye on Avenue du Marché."
Lumian felt a slight unease, but he surveyed the room and spoke directly.
"I have other matters to attend to between 2:30 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. tomorrow. If you happen to spot the target during that time, don't inform me. Simply follow him and ascertain his place of residence."
Anthony Reid locked his dark brown eyes onto Lumian's for a few seconds.
"Very well."
He made no mention of an additional fee, and Lumian was content not to broach the subject either.
...
3 Rue des Blouses Blanches housed a relatively new apartment building. Its beige facade boasted a charming curvature, featuring numerous irregular walls adorned with a variety of statues. Angels, animals, celebrities, and legendary objects found their place amidst the architecture. The building boasted an abundance of large windows, wall pillars, and scroll art, creating an atmosphere of grandeur.
Lumian stood before Room 601 and pressed the doorbell.
With a jingling sound, Franca swung open the dark-red door.
Her flaxen hair cascaded naturally and voluminously, while she wore a loose white silk nightgown that gracefully reached her knees. The wide-open collar revealed a fair expanse of skin.
Observing that the other party showed no signs of wariness and wasn't even wearing a bra, Lumian made a conscious effort to keep his gaze focused.
Before opening the door, Franca seemed to already know the identity of the visitor. She greeted him with a smile.

"Coming to seek knowledge in mysticism?
"After all our discussions, you've finally arrived."
"No, it's something else," Lumian responded, gesturing towards the room, indicating that they should speak inside.
Franca turned and walked towards the sofa, Lumian following closely behind. As he entered, he instinctively scanned his surroundings.
This apartment consisted of two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen. The furnishings in the living room, such as the sofa, coffee table, dining table, chairs, and cupboards, were predominantly beige, iron-black, silver-white, or light gray. The colors were muted and lacked vibrancy. The overall aesthetic was one of simplicity and cleanliness, but it also exuded a touch of coldness. It stood in stark contrast to the living room styles found in most households.
Lumian took a seat on the edge of the divan while Franca curled her legs and reclined on the adjacent armchair, revealing her alluring curves.
"What brings you here?" Franca inquired.
Lumian pointed towards her.
"Aren't you considering changing your clothes?"
Franca glanced down at her nightgown and came to a realization.
"Perhaps it's because you know my original gender. When I'm around you, I always have this illusion that I'm still a man and forget to pay attention to such details."
A smile played on her lips. Rather than changing her attire, she shifted her sitting posture, accentuating her allure even further.
After a few moments, she even left her recliner and settled beside Lumian.
Sensing Lumian's perplexed gaze, she chuckled and remarked, "Since you won't peek, why should I bother changing?"
She made a playful gesture, unreservedly teasing him.
"Madame, you have a wicked sense of humor." Lumian sighed.
Franca grinned and replied, "Life is already tough. I need to seek some amusement for myself.
"But I'm considered fine. There's a group of individuals in the Research Society who harbor little hope for the future and have made it their life goal to pursue enjoyment. They've formed a group called April Fools' Day. Your sister must have mentioned it, right?"
"She did," Lumian confirmed, recalling reading about it in Aurore's grimoires.
Franca refrained from elaborating and fixed her gaze upon Lumian, her eyes resembling calm lakes, awaiting an explanation

for his visit.
Lumian spoke directly, his words carrying a certain bluntness.
"I require a favor."
"Oh?" Franca responded cooperatively, her tone laced with curiosity.
Lumian took a moment to contemplate before continuing.
"Considering you've seen my wanted poster, you must possess some knowledge regarding it.
"I've received information that one of the individuals depicted, a man by the name of Louis Lund, will make an appearance on Avenue du Marché tomorrow. He maintains close ties with the masterminds behind the Poison Spur Mob.
"My intention is to apprehend him and unveil the truth behind the catastrophe in Cordu. However, I'll be preoccupied with crucial matters tomorrow afternoon, so I can't personally await his arrival. I hope you could lend me your assistance. Should he show, tail him and ascertain his whereabouts. If you feel confident, aid me in capturing him. He once possessed Beyonder powers equivalent to a Sequence 8 and is likely a Gardener, though I cannot say for certain at present.
"After acquiring the mirror, you did promise to compensate me. This would be it."
Franca retorted angrily, "This concerns Muggle's death. I will most certainly help. Compensation is not an appropriate term in this context."
"Tailing him doesn't count. But attacking him counts?" Lumian proposed.
Discerning the underlying polite and detached nature of his request, Franca did not insist and simply nodded.
"That works too."
Curiosity danced across her countenance as she posed another query.
"What could be more pressing than apprehending this individual named Louis Lund?
"I expected you to be more concerned about uncovering the truth behind Cordu."
Lumian pondered briefly before speaking candidly, "The Cordu disaster has left me grappling with certain psychological issues. I am presently undergoing regular treatment. I fear that without timely follow-up, I will lose control of my emotions, thus jeopardizing my quest for the truth."
Franca nodded sympathetically, displaying her understanding.
Taking the initiative, she offered a suggestion.
"Would you like me to find a genuine psychiatrist—one with

Beyonder powers—for you?"
"My psychiatrist already possesses them," Lumian revealed, withholding nothing.
Franca refrained from prying further, recalling that Muggle's brother participated in other mystical gatherings.
Lumian mentioned the attributes of a Villain and a Gardener, as well as the existence of Anthony Reid. He provided a detailed description of Reid's appearance to ensure Franca wouldn't mistake him for a companion of Louis Lund, potentially leading to unnecessary conflict.
With that, Lumian rose from his seat, signaling his intention to depart.
Franca stood up, amused. "You've come all this way. Aren't you interested in delving into the mysteries of mysticism?"
"Louise Lund may make an appearance tonight as well," Lumian remarked, eager to return to Salle de Bal Brise as swiftly as possible.
At that precise moment, both he and Franca directed their attention toward the door.
Light footfalls resonated from the stairs before halting nearby.
Franca glanced at the peephole from a distance, her expression suddenly morphing into one of peculiarity.
In hushed tones, she addressed Lumian, "Jenna!"

Chapter 198: Conciliation

Beneath the open window of Room 601, Lumian scaled the wall with his bare hands, aided by the protrusions, statues, and pipes. His descent was swift and steady, story after story, until he made a final leap and landed gracefully on the edge of Rue des Blouses Blanches. He grumbled under his breath, "Why am I forced to climb down from the sixth floor? I haven't done anything!"

Lumian slipped into the shadows and made his way towards Avenue du Marché.

In Room 601.

Franca cast a fleeting glance at the swaying window, adjusting her silk nightgown before approaching the slowly opening door, wearing a smile.

Dressed in a sequined red dress, Jenna stored away the spare key Franca had entrusted to her and entered the apartment.

"Why are you here so early today?" Franca inquired, blocking Jenna's path to the window, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Jenna let out a sigh and replied, "Something happened to the band's six-stringed zither player. While it didn't affect my singing, it put everyone in a foul mood. The dance hall manager, René, asked me to end the performance early and switch tonight's theme to cheek-to-cheek dancing."

The cheek-to-cheek dance in the market district differed from the usual version. It involved intimate embraces and provocative movements between men and women on the dance floor. It was an exhilarating experience, but dance halls needed enough female dancers to organize it.

Attempting to find a topic of conversation, Franca asked, "What happened exactly?" She discreetly calculated the time it would take for Lumian to descend to the first floor, all the while grumbling internally, Why is Muggle's brother a Hunter instead of an Assassin? Assassins can effortlessly leap from the sixth floor and land as light as a feather!

Jenna recounted the band member's unfortunate incident and concluded, "Dammit, why do unlucky people always attract more misfortune?"

"Yes, even though the performance ended earlier than usual, it's still late. Going home would be quite troublesome. I'll sleep at your place."

Given that Jenna lived far away from Avenue du Marché, she often sought refuge at Franca's whenever she performed late into the night at the dance hall. She even had a spare key.

Warehouse... porter... Recalling the information provided by her

subordinate, Franca surmised that it must be related to the matter involving "Rat" Christo.
As she let out a sigh, contemplating how the innocent had lost their kin, Franca inwardly expressed her sorrow.
Brother 007 is incredibly efficient. I only informed him about the mirror people late last night, and the official Beyonders have already dealt with the anomaly before this evening.
Brother 007 was the code name of a man from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, a member of an official organization in Trier. His rank seemed quite high, and Franca had secret connections with many fellow researchers in Trier, often organizing private gatherings with them.
However, Franca knew that the matters involving the mirror people wouldn't end there. The special mirror world still existed, the mystery artifact that Gardner Martin smuggled into Trier remained, and the classic silver mirror in her possession persisted. If these elements weren't eliminated entirely, it would only solve the problem temporarily. Franca couldn't predict when similar anomalies would arise in the future.
Franca approached the classic-styled silver mirror, which allowed entry into the special mirror world, with caution and seriousness. She believed it held a secret related to the Demoness pathway.
"Why are you so quiet?" Jenna asked, extending her right hand and waving it in front of Franca.
Franca snapped back to reality and let out a sigh.
"I feel a bit sad upon hearing about their misfortune."
It was precisely because she didn't want to face the pain of countless innocents that she followed Lumian's suggestion and "handed over" the matter to the officials.
Jenna bypassed Franca and made her way to the guest room, intending to change into more comfortable attire.
As she glanced around, she noticed that the living room window was open, letting in a refreshing breeze.
"It was a bit stuffy," Franca quickly explained.
Jenna regarded her with suspicion.
"Why did you feel the need to explain?"
Ahem... Franca nearly choked on her own saliva.
Thankfully, Jenna didn't dwell on it too much. She entered the guest room and headed towards the washroom, carrying her nightgown and pajamas.
...
Once Lumian returned to Avenue du Marché, he began his rounds, starting with Unit 126, where "Black Scorpion" Roger resided. He approached the four mobsters disguised as beggars stationed at

different entrances, far from their intended target. Lumian made a promise to each of them, guaranteeing 100 verl d'or by Monday.
That night, he struggled to find rest in Salle de Bal Brise. Occasionally, he would wake up, straining his ears for any signs of movement outside the window, hoping to catch the sound of hurried footsteps.
At dawn, while enjoying breakfast at the café and skimming through a newspaper, Louis ascended from the first floor and whispered in Lumian's ear, "Boss, Superintendent Everett requests your presence at the Valiant café, opposite the police headquarters, for a cup of coffee precisely at 10 a.m."
Superintendent Everett wants to meet me, the newly appointed leader of the Savoie Mob? Lumian remained relatively composed with the Mystery Prying Glasses in his possession.
He asked Louis, "Who else will be there?"
"Many," Louis responded in a hushed tone. "They say all the mob leaders from the market district will gather. The official voting begins today."
The voting would extend over three days.
Is that so... So they won't let us disrupt the National Convention election, it seems. I wonder if the Poison Spur Mob will attend? Lumian nodded and left Salle de Bal Brise at 9:15 a.m., making his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.
In Room 207, he put on the Mystery Prying Glasses, experiencing the disorienting sensation of descending from great heights and burrowing into the ground.
Suppressing the urge to retch, Lumian retrieved a mirror and all his cosmetics, busying himself with preparations.
He opted for subtle alterations, focusing on thickening his eyebrows, accentuating his cheekbones, and enhancing shadowy areas. The adjustments created an impression that it was indeed Ciel and not someone else.
As soon as he finished his makeup, Lumian hastily set the mirror aside, unwilling to catch a glimpse of his reflection.
Shortly before 10 a.m., he arrived at the Valiant café and was promptly escorted to a private room by a waiter.
Upon entering, he immediately recognized several familiar faces—Baron Brignais, adorned in formal attire with a top hat and pipe; Franca, sporting trousers, red boots, and a blouse; the towering "Giant" Simon; and the merchant-like figure of "Blood Palm" Black.
Seated in an armchair at the head of the table, Travis Everett, donning a black uniform, rose with a smile upon seeing Lumian enter.
"You must be Ciel, am I right?"

"Yes, Superintendent Everett," Lumian responded respectfully.
Franca, Baron Brignais, and the others, who had risen alongside Travis Everett, exchanged puzzled glances as they observed Lumian.
Franca's gaze averted in enlightenment as she recognized the golden-black hair. Baron Brignais, Giant Simon, and the rest gradually "realized" that it was Ciel.
Adjusting his black-framed glasses, Superintendent Everett's blue eyes gleamed as he half-praised Lumian and patted the recliner beside him.
"You've only been in the market district for less than three weeks, but you've already taken over Salle de Bal Brise. And you're so young. You're really outstanding.
"Sigh, the market district hasn't been peaceful for the past month."
He half-praised Lumian and patted a recliner beside him.
"Come, have a seat here.
"Let me introduce you to the others."
When Lumian stood by Everett's side, the superintendent gestured toward a middle-aged man seated across the coffee table and spoke, "Roger, you're acquainted with him, aren't you?"
"Black Scorpion" Roger? Lumian directed his gaze at the middle-aged man.
Roger, dressed in formal attire with neatly combed black hair, had a slightly chubby face, and his deep-blue eyes resembled the vast sea.
"We're meeting for the first time," Lumian replied with a smile. He noticed a chilling gaze emanating from Black Scorpion.
Everett proceeded to introduce the individuals sitting beside Roger.
"Harman, Castina."
Upon entering the private room, Lumian had noticed only Harman among the few members of the Savoie Mob. The bald man's shining head was so eye-drawing that Lumian almost looked away, fearing that it might reflect his disguised appearance.
Upon closer inspection, Lumian recognized Harman's unique features—a prominent brow, a high nose bridge, and deep-set lips. He possessed the allure of a ruggedly handsome individual. Even in a seated position, his imposing height was evident, complementing his dark breeches shirt splendidly.
Castina, petite and likely under 1.55 meters tall, appeared to be around 30 years old. She possessed curly auburn hair, brown eyes, a curvaceous figure that turned heads, and full lips.
"You should be familiar with Ciel from the Savoie Mob, right?" Everett introduced Ciel to Roger and the others.
Roger flashed a cold smile.

"Indeed, Superintendent. The impression he made on me will never fade."
"Baldy" Harman's eyes brimmed with hatred and cruelty.
Everett sighed and said, "We all reside in the market district. Only by coexisting peacefully can we secure a better future and greater wealth.
"If any conflicts arise, come to me. I'll mediate and arbitrate.
"Ciel, take this cup of coffee to Roger and hand over Salle de Bal Brise's profits for the next six months. The issue between Margot and Ait ends here. If anyone troubles you regarding these matters again, feel free to inform me directly."
Lumian observed Roger, Harman, and Castina with a sense of amusement, realizing that their eyes held no mercy, only restrained coldness and malevolence.
Baron Brignais and the others remained silent, watching the scene unfold as though it were a spectacle. Franca shook her head at Lumian, signaling him not to act recklessly.
Lumian bent down and picked up the cup of coffee from the table.
Suddenly, he raised his hands and flung the contents of the cup at "Black Scorpion" Roger.
Reacting swiftly, Roger evaded the liquid, colliding with the coffee table. Harman and Castina sprang to their feet.
Simultaneously, Lumian pointed at "Black Scorpion" Roger and cursed, "F*ck you! Are you disregarding the Superintendent's words? Playing dumb, are we? If you don't desire peace, speak up. I, Ciel, shall await you at Salle de Bal Brise!
"The look in your eyes tells me vengeance is on your mind!"
How brazen... Franca had not anticipated Lumian's audacity.

Chapter 199: "Unruly"

Travis Everett concealed his emotions behind the black-framed glasses, rendering them inscrutable.

Nevertheless, he made no attempt to halt Lumian's actions. It was as though he had transformed into a mere observer.

Baron Brignais, "Blood Palm" Black, and the rest were taken aback by Lumian's reaction. They couldn't fathom his audacity to splash coffee at "Black Scorpion" Roger in front of the superintendent and sabotage the mediation.

In particular, Baron Brignais felt as though he was encountering his former subordinate, now colleague, for the very first time.

Is he far more unruly and reckless than I had anticipated?

Does he refuse to accept any grievances and is unwilling to pay any price?

Although he attempted to shift the blame onto "Black Scorpion" Roger and the others, it was evident to anyone with a modicum of sense and perception that Lumian was the instigator of the conflict, driven by a strong will of his own.

Clearly, he had no intention of reconciliation. He sought only an excuse to undermine Superintendent Everett's proposal.

Is this not a blatant slap in Superintendent Everett's face?

The superintendent wielded considerable influence in the market district. A slight embellishment in reporting to higher authorities, or rather, stating the unvarnished truth, would draw the attention of official Beyonders and dismantle all our enterprises, including the leaders of the Savoie Mob!

Incensed, "Baldy" Harman denied Lumian the opportunity to shatter the coffee cup on his boss. He lunged forward, stooped down, grasped the coffee table's edge, hoisted it, and flung it at the detestable individual.

Cups clattered to the ground, splintering into shards. Lumian deftly evaded the projectiles, swiftly drawing his black revolver from beneath his arm. He trained it on Harman amid the cacophonous crash of objects and the ensuing chaos.

"Baldy" Harman chuckled, a product of his extreme rage.

"You country hog, do you spurn Superintendent Everett's gracious offer of mediation?

"Very well then, our Poison Spur Mob shall entertain you until one of us is vanquished from this game!

"Go ahead, fire away. Your audacity and lack of respect towards Superintendent Everett know no bounds. If you possess such ability, then pull the trigger!"

Were it not for the impending election and the stringent

surveillance imposed by officials, the Poison Spur Mob would have long seized an opportunity to assassinate Ciel!
In that instant, "Black Scorpion" Roger rose once more. Black flames materialized within his clenched fists, only to dissipate swiftly.
He was reluctant to unveil his Beyonder powers in the presence of Superintendent Everett.
"Short-legged Candlestick" Castina also fixed her gaze on Lumian, poised to strike if he refused to relent.
Upon hearing "Baldy" Harman's retort and provocation, Lumian chuckled.
Bang!
Lumian squeezed the trigger, unleashing a yellow bullet hurtling directly towards "Baldy" Harman's skull.
The audacity of Ciel's action caught Harman off guard. He never expected him to open fire in the presence of Superintendent Everett, defying all rules and driven solely by the desire to end his life.
His reflexes barely saved him. Harman crouched down just in time, his eyes widening in alarm.
The bullet grazed his glistening scalp and careened off, ricocheting into the adjacent washroom with a metallic clang.
In an instant, all the mob leaders sprang to their feet. "Black Scorpion" Roger and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina fixated on Lumian, preparing to retaliate.
Undeterred, Lumian remained resolute. He lowered his gun and aimed it once more at "Baldy" Harman, his gaze devoid of any emotion.
"Enough!"
At that very moment, Superintendent Everett, who had been calmly seated, spoke up.
The indescribable authority emanating from him, combined with his esteemed position, compelled Lumian to instinctively halt his finger from pulling the trigger.
Seizing the opportunity, "Baldy" Harman shifted his position and rose to his feet.
Though the others maintained their combative stance, the palpable tension that had lingered dissipated.
Lamenting his missed chance, Lumian reluctantly holstered his revolver and turned to face Everett.
"Superintendent, I am willing to comply with your request, but they don't seem inclined to do so."
Everett's eyes flickered behind his black-framed spectacles. Standing up, he surveyed the room.

"We will address your conflict after the election.
"For the next three days, I expect all of you to conduct yourselves properly. Fail to do so, and you shall make an enemy out of me. Trust me, that's a predicament you won't be able to handle."
Although Everett's voice carried depth, his tone remained calm, devoid of anger or arrogance. Instead, a hint of sincerity permeated his words.
Yet, those who had resided in the market district for more than two years recalled a term: the "Valiant Mob."
Two years prior, the Valiant Mob held a similar status to the Savoie Mob in the market district. However, due to their repeated defiance and disrespect towards Superintendent Everett, they were ruthlessly eradicated in a joint operation conducted by the authorities. The subsequent rise of the Poison Spur Mob was partly due to the power vacuum left behind in the district's underworld.
Now, only the Valiant café stood as a testament to the existence of such a mob.
The leaders of the Savoie Mob, the Poison Spur Mob, and the other two medium-sized gangs fell into silence for a few seconds before responding to Superintendent Everett's words. They expressed their commitment to restrain their subordinates and ensure that the election proceeded without disruption.
Superintendent Everett's gaze swept across their faces. Without uttering another word, he strode towards the exit of the private room.
As he disappeared beyond the door, "Black Scorpion" Roger, "Baldy" Harman, and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina cast Lumian cold glances before departing from the café.
The remaining gang leaders didn't linger, leaving only the Savoie Mob in the confines of the private room.
Baron Brignais took a leisurely puff from his pipe and addressed Lumian, "You acted too impulsively back there."
Lumian offered a faint smile in response and replied, "I have been awaiting an opportunity like that. Unfortunately, I couldn't seize it to incite the conflict."
Observing the puzzled expressions on the faces of "Giant" Simon, "Blood Palm" Black, and the others, Lumian calmly elaborated, "We have already made two attempts, and the Poison Spur Mob chose to endure. Baron, as you have rightly pointed out, they harbor a significant problem, and they await their chance. I believe that opportunity will present itself soon.
"If we fail to incapacitate the Poison Spur Mob before then, we shall face their unhinged retaliation. And when that moment arrives, none of you will be able to escape.

"Just a moment ago, there were only three members of the Poison Spur Mob present, while we numbered five. Red Boots, your strength is comparable to that of Black Scorpion. With my assistance, you can surely overpower him. Baron, Simon, Black, is it conceivable that you cannot handle Baldy and Short-legged Candlestick? One of you might even be able to impede Superintendent Everett.

"As long as the Poison Spur Mob dares to strike back, we shall eliminate them all right here!"

"Rat" Christo had received instructions from Superintendent Everett the previous night that he was not to be invited today.

Baron Brignais, "Blood Palm" Black, and their comrades found Ciel's words reasonable, yet a deep-seated fear for this individual arose within their hearts.

He wasn't bluffing. He genuinely desired to eliminate "Baldy" Harman and the others!

He was too crazy and extreme!

He possessed the audacity to commit any act without hesitation!

"But this is tantamount to slapping Superintendent Everett in the face. The repercussions will be exceedingly troublesome." "Blood Palm" Black shook his head.

Franca shared the same concern. She wished to caution Lumian that such a course of action would render him unwelcome in the market district. He might even end up with another wanted poster. However, recognizing that the other leaders were present and unable to reveal her true friendship with Lumian, Franca sealed her lips.

A quizzical smile played on Lumian's lips as he inquired, "Wasn't Superintendent Everett killed by the Poison Spur Mob?"

Lunatic... This notion raced through everyone's minds.

Baron Brignais, gently stroking his mahogany-colored pipe, chimed in, "It's nearly impossible to conceal that from official Beyonders. It's merely an excuse."

"In that case, let it go. Blame everything on a lunatic like me. At worst, I'll depart from the market district. I trust the Boss will arrange another task for me once this storm blows over," Lumian calmly remarked, a serene smile gracing his face.

This was indeed a fragment of his genuine thoughts.

Mr. K's mission revolved around earning Gardner Martin's trust, not running Salle de Bal Brise or establishing a foothold in the market district!

If his provocation had genuinely enraged "Black Scorpion" Roger and his accomplices, Lumian believed that Franca would surely come to his aid. With one of the Savoie Mob's leaders on his side,

the others wouldn't hesitate to act. When the time came, united in strength, they stood a high chance of eliminating the remaining three leaders of the Poison Spur Mob.
Once he unraveled the Poison Spur Mob's scheme, Gardner Martin would undoubtedly appreciate Lumian's daring and unorthodox approach in eradicating hidden threats. Even if he lost Salle de Bal Brise and was compelled to "escape" once more, he would merely find sanctuary elsewhere in Trier and continue serving Gardner Martin until he gained his complete approval.
Furthermore, it was advantageous for Lumian. If the Poison Spur Mob finalized their preparations, he would be their primary target for revenge. Failing to address the issue beforehand would only heighten the danger he faced. In the future, even if Madame Moon birthed another group, Lumian wouldn't fret. Today, Louis Lund would likely be present in the market district. By temporarily suppressing the deaths of "Black Scorpion" Roger and his cronies, creating a façade of tranquility, Lumian could patiently await his target at 126 Avenue du Marché.
These individuals weren't parliamentary candidates whose demise would incite an uproar.
After a few moments of silence, Baron Brignais approached the door and issued a reminder, "Superintendent Everett has probably marked you. There will be considerable trouble after the election."
Lumian responded with a smile, "Perhaps he will mysteriously vanish one day."
Having said that, Lumian calmly endured the mildly apprehensive gazes of "Giant" Simon and his comrades.
You see, having laid the groundwork, anything I utter now will convince them all.
...
At 3:15 p.m., Lumian arrived at Quartier du Jardin Botanique in a public carriage. Once again, he beheld Mason Café, housed in a beige four-story building adorned with lush green plants entwined on its outer walls.
Passing through a sheltered walkway upheld by pillars, he entered the interior, enveloped by dark-green walls and expansive windows. Settling into the familiar Booth D, he removed his wide-brimmed round hat.
"A cup of Intis coffee," he instructed the waitress and patiently waited.

Chapter 200: Spectator

The titular coffee was rich and aromatic, a perfect match for the creamy cupcake. Though Lumian's focus was elsewhere, he still appreciated their beauty.

The moment the clock struck 3:30 p.m., a familiar soft female voice reached him from the booth behind.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."

"Good afternoon, Madame Susie," Lumian responded, concealing his surprise.

While Lumian didn't intentionally observe the customers entering Mason Café, his Hunter instincts allowed him to maintain awareness of his surroundings.

When he had arrived at the café at 3:18 p.m., Cabin D had been deserted. No one entered from 3:15 to 3:30 p.m.

And yet, here was Madame Susie, appearing silently behind him, in the very spot behind Booth D!

How mystical and bizarre was this!

Susie's voice gently inquired once more, "How did you feel after your last treatment?"

Lumian didn't hold back and responded simply, "I felt much better than before. At least I could release my emotions."

"That's a good thing. Suppressing your feelings and bottling up your emotions will only exacerbate your mental problems and lead you down a self-destructive path until your innate will to live is completely overwhelmed," Susie commented in a calm and soothing tone, confirming Lumian's transformation.

A hint of a smile laced her words.

"Let's have a conversation first. We'll discuss all the things you've encountered in the past two weeks. Feel free to choose what you believe you can and are willing to share."

Lumian knew he needed to calm himself and undergo further psychiatric treatment as a foundation for unlocking more memories later. Hence, he offered no resistance. He chuckled wryly and said, "There's nothing I can't tell you. I've even shared that dream with you. Everything else can only be classified as minor secrets."

He paused for a moment and began with Charlie.

"There's an unlucky and dim-witted fellow at the motel I'm staying at..."

Lumian casually recounted the events of the past two weeks.

Gradually, his mind relaxed, as if he had returned to a time before Cordu's destruction.

Aurore, who rarely ventured outside, would hear about everything

that transpired in Cordu from him. He delighted in sharing it with his sister, even boasting about the successful pranks he had orchestrated.
As time trickled away, Lumian's rigid posture softened as he sank into the plush sofa.
He refrained from delving into further details. Time was limited, and he couldn't afford to waste it. He didn't touch upon the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Franca's true gender, or his suspicions regarding her motives for joining the Savoie Mob. He merely mentioned his encounter with a pen pal of Aurore's—a Sequence 7 Witch of the Demoness pathway, who happened to be in the same mob.
Likewise, he provided only a brief mention of performing a ritual and receiving an additional boon, without going into the specifics.
Susie listened intently throughout their conversation. Every so often, she would prompt him with a gentle "And then?", allowing Lumian to seamlessly continue.
After recounting his experiences from the past two weeks, Lumian spoke in a self-deprecating tone, "I can't help but wonder if it's my own fault for stumbling upon so many Beyonder events in such a short span of time. Sometimes, I question why every human and dog in Trier seems to possess Beyonder powers."
For once, Susie didn't respond immediately. After a few moments, she smiled and replied, "I can perceive that your mental state has indeed improved compared to before."
"How can you tell?" Lumian didn't mention the details of his tearful carriage ride upon seeing Aurore's obituary. He didn't believe that describing all of that was an accurate reflection of his mental state.
Susie spoke in a gentle tone, "I can sense that you're reconstructing your social connections and beginning to form friendships."
"Friends?" Lumian asked, slightly amused. "Charlie, Jenna, Franca? Can they truly be called friends?"
They are mere acquaintances!
Susie responded with a smile, "Friendship comes in various forms. Not all require deep connections. You simply need to ask yourself—when they face challenges that lie within your capabilities to solve, would you be willing to offer assistance? That will reveal if they can be considered your friends."
"It depends on the specific circumstances and the price I must pay. I'm not the type to go out of my way to help just anyone," Lumian muttered.
Susie didn't press further and explained, "For someone prone to self-destruction, a sign of their emergence from the quagmire is

their willingness to forge new social bonds.
"Emperor Roselle—assuming he truly said it—once remarked that humans are the sum of their social relationships. When you no longer resist forming new connections, it signifies that you're no longer opposed to your own future.
"Of course, this is just one aspect. It's not everything."
Lumian fell silent for a moment before speaking again, "Madame Susie, there's something I'd like to ask you. I mentioned a series of coincidences that have befallen me. Are they truly as Madam Magician suggested? Could they be partially influenced by Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Spectator pathway?"
In contrast to the previous session, Susie appeared more at ease. She chuckled and remarked, "Are you attempting to divert the topic? Are you still resistant to such matters?
"Actually, one can discern it from certain details. You took the initiative to request the 'Red Boots' lady to enlighten you on mystical matters whenever she was available, but you never followed through. The sole visit you made was on the pretext of her repaying a favor. It suggests that you remain unwilling to establish a closer bond with her.
"That's natural. How can a patient recover after just one treatment? You need not burden yourself..."
Susie tirelessly voiced her observations, gently pinpointing some of Lumian's current psychological issues.
"If it were the last time, I wouldn't have been so forthright. It would have only bred resistance, causing you to close yourself off further. However, now you exhibit certain inclinations toward forging new social connections. This will allow you to gain clearer insights into your true self and facilitate your progress."
Having his underlying thoughts laid bare by Susie, Lumian's initial reaction was wariness, vigilance, and denial. Yet, Susie's composed demeanor, non-aggressive analysis, and accurate understanding of the situation gradually eased his tension, enabling him to confront his deep-seated problems.
His body and mind gradually settled.
Susie refrained from prying further and addressed Lumian's inquiry.
"Madam Magician's explanation is not entirely incorrect, but it lacks specificity.
"For a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Spectator pathway to engineer a coincidence, they must employ face-to-face psychological cues or hypnosis. In other words, they need to be present around you, Baron Brignais, and his associates.
"The reason you didn't notice it and Baron Brignais remained

oblivious is that Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Spectator pathway possess an additional Beyonder power—Psychological Invisibility."
"Psychological Invisibility? How does it differ from regular invisibility?" Lumian inquired, perplexed.
Susie calmly elucidated, "Psychological Invisibility is not true invisibility. It merely prevents you from perceiving me, even when I am standing right before you and numerous others have already witnessed my presence."
"Sounds very magical..." Lumian sighed with a sense of wonder. For some inexplicable reason, he felt as though Psychiatrists were all around him, yet he remained oblivious to their presence.
"This won't change even if you employ Spirit Vision. Your intuition for danger will not react until I am prepared to strike," Susie continued. "By comparison, a Shadow Ascetic's concealment within shadows occasionally evokes the sensation of being watched by the darkness."
Lumian pressed, "Which pathway does Shadow Ascetic belong to?"
"Secrets Suppliant," Susie replied simply.
Secrets Suppliant pathway? Above Listener and below Shepherd, there's a Sequence known as Shadow Ascetic? This belongs to Mr. K's pathway... Occasionally, I sense someone observing me in the surrounding darkness because of him or his subordinates. Combining this with Aurore's grimoires and Madam Magician's clues, Lumian felt a wave of enlightenment.
For the Secrets Suppliant pathway, Aurore had only noted down Sequence 9 Secrets Suppliant and Sequence 8 Listener.
Madam Magician appears to write a substantial amount, but it's actually just an outline without much detail. It's not as comprehensive as Madame Susie's explanation... Lumian mumbled curiously and asked, "Aren't you concerned that revealing your pathway's Beyonder powers to me might harm you?"
Susie brushed off the question and continued, "If you're a High-Sequence Beyonder of the Spectator pathway, there's no need for such elaborate measures. Even if they're far away from you, they can subtly influence you, causing you to unknowingly follow their arrangements and create various coincidences.
"Though I too am a Spectator, I must still caution you, 'Beware of the Spectator!'"
High-Sequence Beyonder... Lumian was alarmed.
"So, you 'arranged' for the paperboy to deliver an outdated newspaper to me?"
Madame Susie is a High-Sequence Beyonder, a true demigod?
"It wasn't me," Susie said, feeling a tad embarrassed. "It was my

companion."
Companion? Lumian recalled Madam Magician's initial suggestion and guessed, "The other Psychiatrist? He was here last time too?"
"Yes," Susie candidly admitted. "Your condition is more serious, and I wasn't too confident, so I invited her along to assist me. Yes, as a precautionary measure.
"In fact, she's here today as well. She's sitting across from you."
Across from me? Lumian glanced in surprise at the empty seat across the coffee table. Not only was there no one present, but there wasn't even an indentation from someone sitting there!
In the next instant, he heard a gentle female voice with a hint of a smile and a slightly brisk tone.
"Hello."

Chapter 201: Recalling

Lumian was taken aback, his eyes widening in surprise as he glanced at the vacant seat across from him. With a polite tone, he mustered, "Hello."

In that instant, a memory from his sister Aurore flashed through his mind. She had once mentioned an intriguing phrase: Expert consultation!

Although I'm not entirely surrounded by invisible Psychiatrists, there are two of them, and I can't detect them either... Lumian muttered inwardly.

The woman sitting opposite him fell silent, while Susie's voice assumed a more relaxed and lighthearted tone.

"It seems the newspaper has left a lasting impression on you. Does that mean it had a positive impact?"

"Yes," Lumian replied candidly.

He had reached a point where he could confront the emotional turmoil within him instead of burying it deep down. Otherwise, he would have tried to avoid any encounters with "Red Boots" Franca, as she invariably brought up Aurore.

Naturally, this evoked intense waves of emotion.

Susie skillfully redirected the conversation back to its original path.

"If you wish to further investigate any unusual coincidences that have occurred during this period and identify their underlying sources, I can assist you."

"I won't delve directly into your memories, but I can awaken them all and present them chronologically before your eyes. Of course, this excludes those hidden deep within the recesses of your subconscious. They pose too great a risk," Susie explained.

"Are you willing to give it a try?"

Lumian didn't hesitate for a moment.

"Yes."

Whenever he noticed any coincidences around him, he would occasionally recall his recent experiences and meticulously scrutinize the corresponding details. Now, he was merely shifting to a more effective approach.

"Lean back fully against the sofa, relax, and close your eyes..." Susie's gentle voice reached Lumian's ears unhurriedly.

Just as he adjusted his sitting position and prepared to calm his mind and close his eyes, a sudden "volcanic eruption" erupted within his thoughts.

This unexpected "attack" caught him off guard, leaving his subconscious unable to effectively shield him.

Magma and smoke burst forth like luminous specks, each containing a distinct scene.
The multitude of glowing dots arranged themselves chronologically, giving Lumian the sensation of watching a play with himself as the central character.
It unfolded in a blur, yet every detail remained vivid and complete.
As the temperature soared, Lumian's mind raced, threatening to release wisps of white smoke.
He witnessed each scene and recalled every detail, skillfully connecting them and searching for any abnormalities.
Abruptly, a furrow formed on his brow, and he murmured in anguish, "I've realized—I've realized that the memory from before I returned to Auberge du Coq Doré after my prayer for a boon has vanished!"
Lumian's eyes widened, and his facial features contorted in visible distress.
The memory that should have been present was now a void!
In that moment, a gentle female voice resonated within his mind.
"Has it truly vanished, or have you forgotten or overlooked it?" spoke the lady seated across from him, her tone devoid of its previous cheerfulness.
Like a lightning bolt, it illuminated Lumian's mind, casting light into the darkest recesses beyond his subconscious.
Lumian's expression grew increasingly pained, and he couldn't help but bow his head as he struggled to say, "I-I see it, I see it...
"I was in conversation with the angel sealed within me!
"H—His name is Termiboros!"
At last, Lumian recollected something that had slipped his memory.
The corruption contained within his left chest was, in essence, an angel who believed in Inevitability—Termiboros!
Initially, he had intended to seek guidance from Madam Magician on how to harness the angel's powers and avert any potential negative consequences, but he had completely forgotten about it.
"Is this the corruption sealed within your body?" Susie's reaction appeared unsurprised, her voice maintaining a calm demeanor.
Lumian instinctively exhaled, his fingertips reaching his forehead, already dampened with cold sweat.
He truthfully replied, "Yes, He attempted to entice me into aiding His escape from the seal, but I refused. And then, I simply forgot.
"This is truly... truly bizarre..."
Termiboros is undeniably sealed within my body and can't break free, yet I was unwittingly affected by Him!
"That's to be expected. One mustn't underestimate any angel, even

when sealed," Susie offered an explanation to allay Lumian's immediate apprehension.
The unknown was always the most terrifying.
She continued, "In ancient times, angels were also referred to as subsidiary gods. This implies that They possess the essence of a deity. Even when sealed, They can exert a certain influence upon the external world through various means.
"Did you, perhaps, believe that with the seal of the great entity, the corruption upon your chest was more akin to a boon? As long as you follow the correct procedures at the appropriate stages, you shouldn't encounter any issues apart from enduring greater pain and assuming a certain risk of losing control."
Lumian fell into silence, recognizing that he had entertained similar thoughts of late.
"You must remember that in such matters, the potency of a curse is no less than that of a boon, if not stronger," warned Susie. "I don't know how Termiboros has influenced you, but given His belief in Inevitability, I suspect His primary aim is to induce a deviation in your destiny.
"However, you needn't worry excessively. He is, after all, sealed, and His capacity for influence is considerably limited. Moving forward, as long as you continuously assess your condition and consistently seek guidance on your actions, you can largely circumvent this predicament."
"Alright." Lumian retrieved a pen and paper and hastily jotted down a memo.
The note pertained to consulting Madam Magician regarding Termiboros.
He feared succumbing to the angel's influence from the realm of Inevitability and forgetting these pertinent matters once the treatment concluded.
Lumian carefully stored away his pen and paper, releasing a slow exhale.
"Now that I've recollected the events involving Termiboros, I feel considerably more at ease. It appears that my spirituality had detected something."
"I can perceive an improvement in your mental state," affirmed Susie, echoing Lumian's sentiments.
Taking advantage of the moment, Lumian posed a question, "Ladies, do you believe that Susanna Mattise has been fully eradicated by the official Beyonders? Or should I continue searching for clues at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons to prevent her from launching another attack?"
Taking note of the time, Monsieur Ive, the landlord of Auberge du

Coq Doré, should soon find himself in dire straits.
Susie offered a gentle smile as she replied, "The Spectator path isn't well-versed in divination."
Seated across from Lumian, the "invisible" lady smiled and added, "Madam Magician is a divination expert. Did she not provide you with an answer? Or perhaps her hidden message eluded your understanding?"
She didn't say anything... Lumian pondered for a moment, recalling Madam Magician's response regarding Susanna Mattise.
Suddenly, he froze.
Madam Magician had continuously guided him on how to resolve the issue with Susanna Mattise, subtly hinting that he should seek assistance from Mr. K.
From a different perspective, she had never once considered the possibility that Susanna Mattise had been entirely eliminated!
In her view, this predicament would undoubtedly resurface!
Isn't it too ambiguous? Or does she assume it's self-evident and fails to emphasize it? Lumian mumbled to himself, nodding in realization.
"I know the answer."
As Lumian spoke, he made a connection based on the manner and demeanor exhibited by the Psychiatrist seated opposite him when addressing Madam Magician.
Could they also be members of the secretive organization that employs tarot cards as their code names?
To which cards do they correspond?
After making some adjustments, Lumian sought clarification about his mental state.
"The mere thought of meeting Louis Lund fills me with anxiety, excitement, and adrenaline. I can't seem to control my emotions. Is this a severe psychological issue?"
Susie responded in a soothing voice, "That's actually quite normal. People often exhibit similar behavior when it comes to matters they deeply care about. You're just a bit more intense than usual.
"If you didn't react this way, I would have been concerned that you were facing a more severe psychological problem and had repressed all your emotions.
"What you need to focus on now is not being fearful or overwhelmed, but rather learning to manage those emotions."
Normal... Lumian felt reassured by Susie's explanation, and his concern regarding the matter at hand subsided, allowing his mental state to stabilize.
He pondered and asked, "Manage them?"
How do I do that?

Susie replied, "The simplest method is to always remind yourself not to overreact. Whenever you feel a similar surge of emotions, take deep breaths and find your calm.

"It may sound easy, but in reality, it's quite challenging. When emotions flare up, it's difficult for humans to maintain rationality. They rarely think about controlling themselves. By the time they regain their composure, they often find that they've already made a mistake.

"I can set up a trigger for you. Once your emotional reactions exceed a certain threshold, it will remind you of my words and assist you in regaining your rationality, allowing you to attempt to regain control.

"This is a temporary solution. In the long run, it will depend on your own efforts. However, once you become accustomed to self-reflection during times of heightened emotion, the issue will become more manageable.

"Are you willing to give it a try?"

"Alright." Lumian had no qualms about accepting external assistance.

At some point, Susie's voice took on an otherworldly and elusive quality. It felt as though she had said a great deal, yet Lumian couldn't recall a single word. The only thing he could remember was her concluding statement: "The trigger has been set. If all goes well, it will last for two weeks, perfectly timed for your next session. At that point, we can decide whether to make any adjustments."

Lumian briefly acknowledged her words and assessed his mental state.

After more than ten seconds, filled with both fear and anticipation, he inquired, "Is it possible for me to attempt to awaken more buried memories from my subconscious?"

Chapter 202: Analysis

"Of course," came Susie's gentle voice, reaching Lumian's ears.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt a weight pulling at his consciousness, dragging him down swiftly into deeper depths.

Within a matter of seconds, his eyelids grew heavy, and he could not resist the urge to close them. His thoughts became muddled and indistinct.

In his dazed state, Lumian appeared to transform into a spectral figure, floating through the familiar village of Cordu in the cloak of night.

After an unknown duration, he caught sight of the onion-shaped cathedral, though his perception remained hazy. A concentrated beam of light emerged near its main entrance, while the rest of the darkness loomed like an ominous shadow.

Lumian meandered aimlessly toward the adjacent cemetery.

In the darkness, tombstones stood in silent formation, and trees assumed an eerie presence.

A group of men were hauling a lifeless body toward a deep pit, preparing to cast it down.

Beneath the faint glow of the crimson moon, one of the men lifted his head and surveyed his surroundings.

His face, with black hair and piercing blue eyes, bore deep creases, as if shrouded in shadows.

Pons Bénet!

Lumian snapped out of his reverie.

The distance between them diminished instantly. Lumian lowered his gaze and beheld the corpse.

The face of the lifeless body appeared swollen from water, drained of color. The brown hair clung damply to the head, while the brown eyes remained wide open, reflecting agony, indignation, and resentment.

Reimund!

A surge of intense hatred filled Lumian's heart as he hurled accusations at Pons Bénet and his companions, giving vent to his emotions.

It felt as if he had unleashed a torrent of curses, as if he had pounced on Pons Bénet, the villain. It felt as if he was digging a profound pit with his bare hands.

Dirt pierced his nails, uncovering another corpse at the pit's bottom.

The girl's eyes, a shade of lake-blue, bulged fiercely. Her face bore a bluish-purple hue, her mouth agape, and her neck showed evident signs of strangulation. She wore an expression of excruciating

pain.
Ava!
Lumian shot up from his seat, propelled by intense emotions, and his eyes flew open.
Huff. Puff. Lumian stared at the vacant sofa opposite him in the booth, gasping heavily.
The intense anger and hatred from his dream lingered, causing him to tremble uncontrollably.
After a few moments, Susie's gentle voice broke the silence. "What did you see?" she asked.
Lumian's face twisted slightly as he replied, his voice filled with pain.
"I saw them. I saw Reimund and Ava's bodies. One of them drowned, and the other appeared to have been strangled to death... Pons Bénet and his gang were burying their bodies in the cemetery next to the cathedral... I shouted at them, wanted to do something... and then I woke up."
Susie listened attentively and spoke calmly.
"This time, I didn't allow you to have a lucid dream. Instead, I let you experience certain subconscious scenes in the form of a dream.
"While it may not present the complete truth, it combines fragments of what actually happened. There might be overlaps in time or space, but the essential details remain intact. It provides us with a basis for interpretation."
Lumian asked, his voice filled with anguish, "So you're saying that I really witnessed Pons Bénet and the others burying Reimund and Ava's bodies in the cemetery?"
"I'm not entirely certain," Susie analyzed. "What we can conclude so far is that Reimund was drowned by Pons Bénet and his companions, and Ava was strangled to death by them. Their bodies were eventually buried somewhere in the cemetery, and you may or may not have been present at the scene. It's possible that you discovered it later and attempted to unearth their corpses as well as seek revenge on Pons Bénet and his gang, but the outcome wasn't favorable. Otherwise, your recent dream would have reflected some of that content."
Lumian fell silent for a moment before speaking again.
"So that's what happened... I was wondering why Pons Bénet and the others didn't kill me and toss me into the deep pit if I was truly there..."
Part of his anguish stemmed from a fear deep within him—a suspicion that he might have been in league with Pons and his gang.

"We cannot dismiss the possibility that you were present at the scene and witnessed the entire incident, but there are numerous explanations. It may not be as you imagine it to be. They spared your life because they needed a vessel with exceptional physical attributes." Susie understood Lumian's doubts and resistance. Her words aimed to soothe him gently. "What I can affirm is that the anger, hatred, and desire for revenge you experienced in your dream were genuine. Those were your true emotions at that time. In other words, regardless of the circumstances, the deaths of Ava and Reimund have nothing to do with you."

Upon hearing Susie's words, Lumian felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He slumped against the sofa, his strength draining away.

His mind was now much calmer than before, and he no longer needed to maintain a facade of bravery.

In the blink of an eye, an invisible warm breeze swept through his body and mind, soothing him completely.

Susie's encouraging voice filled the air, her smile evident.

"Compared to our last session, you're in a much better state now. You showed courage sooner than I anticipated, facing the doubts and questions you were reluctant to confront.

"In the realm of psychology, this is a crucial indication that you're breaking free from the puzzle. Only by directly confronting the problem can you find a resolution.

"Alright, that concludes today's treatment. You're ready to face Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, and the others."

In that very instant, the composed Lumian pondered the words of Madam Magician, recalling her earnest advice.

"There is yet another matter.

"I may be compelled to believe in another entity at some point, but ordinarily, I am forbidden to recollect His honorific name. Do you —either of you—possess a means to prevent such recollection?"

The cheerful female voice responded, her words carrying a gentle smile, "That is quite simple. I shall provide you with a psychological trigger. When your spiritual intuition feels devoid of protection, your subconscious will replace the honorific name with 'That Being' to safeguard against its impact.

"While under protection, you may freely remember and speak His name in its entirety..."

Lumian's mind turned adrift briefly upon hearing the other person declare, "The psychological cue has been planted."

"Thank you, Madam. And thank you too, Madam Susie," Lumian nodded toward the empty space across from the booth.

"You're welcome. See you in two weeks," the gentle female voice

replied, and Susie added, "See you in two weeks."
Lumian wasn't sure when they departed, but the area around Booth D grew still. Only the chirping of birds in the botanical garden, the clopping of hooves on the road, and the distant hum of machinery resonated.
He lifted his cup, finishing the remainder of his Intis coffee in one gulp, adjusting his mental state.
Seizing the moment, he replayed the entire treatment process in his mind, and an inexplicable feeling settled upon him. Madam Susie's last statement seemed somewhat peculiar.
She said I can face Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, and the others now... Does that imply that the answers I might receive from Madame Pualis could shatter me?
It's understandable, but what if my condition doesn't improve as expected? Will she advise me to give up the opportunity to meet Louis Lund? But what if Louis Lund emerged yesterday? Wouldn't it be a major problem if I hadn't had my follow up?
If that's the case, shouldn't Madam Susie have warned me against approaching Madame Pualis or confronting the padre before the follow-up session?
How can she be so certain that I won't encounter Louis Lund in the past two weeks, or that he'll elude capture if I do?
Spectator...
Lumian's senses snapped back to full alertness. He exited Booth D and hailed a public carriage back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Lumian didn't rush to send a messenger to Auberge du Coq Doré or the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches to inform Madam Magician about Termiboros. Instead, he made his way straight to 126 Avenue du Marché to check if his subordinates, Anthony Reid, or Franca had discovered anything.
With a dark brown wide-brimmed hat atop his head, Lumian strolled to a spot diagonally across from "Black Scorpion" Roger's house, roughly 20 meters away. He settled into a gap between two buildings, leaning against the wall.
Several vagrants occupied the area.
One of them shuffled closer to Lumian and whispered, "Nothing yet."
Lumian nodded and directed his gaze toward the three-story building with a garden, keeping an eye on passersby.
As time ticked by, the sun descended on the horizon, casting a dwindling light. The lamplighters commenced their task, igniting the gas lamps one by one.
At that moment, Lumian spotted a man clad in a grayish-blue

worker's uniform.
Underneath his cap, light-yellow hair peeked out, and his slightly chubby face exuded an air of simplicity and honesty.
Anthony Reid? *Why is he out and about?* Lumian recognized the information broker, perplexed by his actions.
Resembling a worker finishing his shift, Anthony Reid hurried toward the end of Avenue du Marché.
Lumian's pupils contracted when he realized that Anthony Reid wasn't merely passing by; he was approaching someone.
The man sported a blue gown adorned with yellow buttons, a waxed hat, a white tie, and a red vest. He sat inside a rental carriage bearing a yellow plate, clearly a driver affiliated with the Empire Carriage Company. Carriage drivers from different companies donned distinct uniforms.
The carriage driver tipped his hat, keeping his head lowered as if waiting for a customer.
Lumian's heart stirred. He rose to his feet, taking a few steps in that direction.
As Anthony Reid brushed past the carriage, he stumbled and collided with the horse pulling it.
Startled, the horse attempted to raise its forelegs, but the carriage driver swiftly tugged on the reins, firmly restraining the animal.
Yet, as the carriage driver lifted his head, his face was revealed.
In his forties, with black hair, Lumian couldn't discern his features clearly due to the distance. Nonetheless, a faint sense of familiarity washed over him.
Lumian narrowed his eyes as he profusely apologized to Anthony Reid and left the carriage behind. A valet emerged from 126 Avenue du Marché.
Approaching the carriage, the valet addressed the driver,
"My master wishes to hire your carriage. Proceed inside and assist with moving some items."
The carriage driver nodded, replying in a deep voice, "Okay."
Following the valet, he entered the residence belonging to "Black Scorpion" Roger.
Lumian, who had witnessed the entire sequence of events without catching their conversation, smirked.
He was now utterly certain that the carriage driver was Louis Lund!
At long last, you've arrived!

Chapter 203: Cooperation

Lumian retreated to the cluster of tramps, patiently awaiting the emergence of Louis Lund.

Soon enough, Anthony Reid, the information broker, returned after changing his attire, seemingly determined to fulfill his promise and seize an opportunity to tail Louis Lund.

At that moment, he sported a yellowish-white shirt and a brown formal coat. There was no bow tie around his neck, but he wore a round hat, resembling a clerk fresh out of the office.

Had Lumian not possessed a certain knowledge of Reid's build, temperament, and gait, he might have failed to recognize him.

After considering his options, Lumian stepped out from the crevice between the two buildings and confronted Anthony Reid.

Having discarded his disguise upon departing the Valiant Café, he now donned a simple ensemble consisting of black-framed glasses and a broad brown hat. Those familiar with him could effortlessly discern his identity.

Noticing the shift in Anthony Reid's gaze, Lumian whispered as they brushed past each other, "I'm back. Await me at the rear entrance."

Although the Prophecy Spell indicated a reunion with Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché, Lumian aimed to avert any potential mishaps.

On one hand, the Prophetic Concoction derived from his body's response, rendering it somewhat unreliable. There might be omissions within the prophecy. On the other hand, the manifestation of a prophecy could assume various forms, deviating entirely from his anticipated sequence of events.

Anthony Reid withdrew his gaze and nodded, signifying his comprehension.

He advanced onward, passing by the residence of "Black Scorpion" Roger, and disappearing into the distance down an alley.

Lumian did not immediately turn around. Beneath the glow of street lamps, he pressed onward.

Just as he reached a dimly lit section, a figure emerged from the shadows beneath a dilapidated, iron-black street lamp in the alley ahead.

The towering individual, garbed in a form-fitting black robe with a hood that nearly concealed the face, beckoned to Lumian.

Franca? Lumian instantly formed a conjecture and hastened towards her.

The conspicuously dressed character was indeed "Red Boots" Franca.

This time, she had forgone her trademark red boots in favor of black ones.
"Aren't you concerned about being discovered?" Lumian couldn't help but inquire.
While Trieriens had a high tolerance for eccentric attire and even actively pursued fashion trends, loitering in secrecy while dressed in such a manner would undoubtedly draw the attention of "Black Scorpion" Roger and the Poison Spur Mob—even the passing laborers!
Franca grinned nonchalantly and retorted, "You don't understand. This is all part of the procedure! Didn't your sister teach you?"
Indeed, she did teach me, but she never mentioned employing it in such a place or situation... Before Lumian could utter another word, Franca waved her hand dismissively.
"Fret not, I won't be discovered."
As her words faded, she took a step backward, merging seamlessly with the shadow and vanishing from Lumian's sight.
With such abilities, one could wear anything they pleased... Lumian once again found himself envious of the Assassin path.
If it weren't for the inevitable gender change at Sequence 7, he would have considered this path more to his liking than that of the Hunter.
Emerging from the shadows once more, Franca pointed toward 126 Avenue du Marché in the distance.
"That carriage driver should be the Louis Lund you seek. Shall I assist you in tailing him later?
"I understand that Hunters possess a hound's nose and eagle's eyes, making them adept at tracking, but you struggle with concealment. Staying too far away risks losing the target, while staying too close risks discovery. It's safer if I handle it.
"Don't forget, Louis Lund is also a Beyonder, and he worships an evil god. It's possible he possesses unique abilities."
This time, Lumian didn't resist or reject the offer. He nodded and replied, "Very well."
At present, he couldn't mark Louis Lund with a distinct scent, and darkness was swiftly descending. The crowded streets, filled with pedestrians and carriages, would muddle any traces. Tailing from 20 to 30 meters away could easily result in losing the target with the slightest misstep.
Franca's thin, red lips curled into a visible smile, free from the confines of the hooded shadow, as she spoke,"Your afternoon therapy session was quite effective. A man should be more open-minded, untroubled by trivial matters."
She lightly tapped her chest as she spoke.

From her possession emerged a glass bottle.
The surface of the small bottle had been intricately etched into small squares, reflecting the nearby streetlamp's light and shimmering with psychedelic colors.
"When I lived as a man, I found these perfume bottles to be beautifully crafted, but I felt too self-conscious to buy them or carry them with me. Now, I have no such concerns. Sometimes, changing your gender can open the door to a new world," Franca said with emotion.
The door to a new world refers to sleeping with men? If it weren't for the crucial task of tracking Louis Lund, Lumian would definitely have provided such a rejoinder.
Opening the lid, she brought the pressed glass bottle to Lumian's nose.
"Remember its scent."
The perfume was refreshing and natural, akin to strolling through a forest on a summer's day.
"Got it." Lumian nodded slightly.
Franca proceeded to spray it on herself.
"It has distinct top, middle, and base notes, but the differences are subtle. There's no need to discern them specifically. You'll know it by the scent alone.
"I'll position myself three to four meters away from Louis Lund. Without a hound's nose, he won't detect this fragrance that clearly doesn't belong to the market district."
Lumian added thoughtfully, "So, I am to track your perfume from a distance of ten to twenty meters?"
It was indeed a clever strategy.
"That's correct." Franca produced a handful of fluorescent powder, sprinkling it over herself, and recited a deep incantation.
It appeared to be a fusion of the Hermes words for "hidden" and "body."
Almost instantaneously, Lumian witnessed Franca's form gradually fading away, as if an eraser were obliterating a pencil drawing.
Apart from the lingering fragrance in his nostrils, he had completely lost track of the Witch.
Once again, Lumian marveled at the Demoness path's performance as a Low- to Mid-Sequence Beyonder.
In the blink of an eye, Lumian felt the fragrance's source receding, drawing closer to the three-story building with a garden at 126 Avenue du Marché.
Lumian made his way in that direction, slipping into the shadows and pressing himself against the wall.

After nearly half an hour, a man named Louis Lund emerged, dressed in a red vest, blue uniform, white tie, and waxed hat. Accompanying him was "Black Scorpion" Roger, impeccably attired in a formal suit with neatly combed black hair.
One of them took the reins of the carriage, while the other entered inside.
Why is "Black Scorpion" Roger following him? Is he planning to meet Madame Pualis in person? Lumian furrowed his brow in slight confusion.
This introduced new variables to his plan.
Originally, Lumian intended to find an opportune moment during Louis Lund's return journey. With his current strength, he could easily overpower his target, even if they were both Sequence 8s. Plus, he had the assistance of Witch Franca.
However, if "Black Scorpion" Roger joined the equation, things would become considerably more troublesome.
From the midwife's performance in his dream, Lumian deduced that a Heretic Spellmaster possessed numerous mystical techniques and considerable power. They were fully capable of matching a Witch from the Assassin pathway.
While Lumian could have Franca distract "Black Scorpion" Roger while he dealt with Louis Lund, the battle between two Mid-Sequence Beyonders wouldn't be swift, thus increasing the risk of discovery.
Hmm... If "Black Scorpion" Roger truly intends to meet Madame Pualis, I'll follow him instead of attacking. My objective is to locate Madame Pualis and establish contact with her. Lumian swiftly revised his plan and devised a new strategy.
The rental carriage began its journey toward the opposite end of Avenue du Marché, and the refreshing, natural fragrance faded away.
Lumian hurried along beside the gas street lamps, maintaining a distance of nearly 20 meters.
After a while, he sensed the perfume come to a halt. Advancing another ten meters, he witnessed the rental carriage pulling over by the roadside. "Black Scorpion" Roger disembarked, carrying a wooden box.
Not far away stood Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Within a matter of seconds, Louis Lund directed the carriage toward a fork in the road, bypassing the bustling area. Meanwhile, "Black Scorpion" Roger ventured into the market alone.
Is Madame Pualis at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman? Or is "Black Scorpion" Roger merely escorting Louis Lund for a distance, concerned about potential targeting? Lumian speculated as he

hastened forward.
Regardless, capturing Louis Lund took precedence!
Behind Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, there were only a few pedestrians. Under the pitch-black sky, occasionally, one could spot a lone figure.
Several street lamps here were out of order, leaving the road engulfed in darkness. It was wide enough for several carriages to pass side by side.
Lumian surveyed the surroundings, wasting no time. He removed his black-framed glasses and sprinted forward.
Before long, he caught up with the slowly moving carriage. As Louis Lund sensed the anomaly, he pushed down on the carriage with his left hand and lunged toward the driver's seat.
From this distance, Lumian could clearly see the black-haired, blue-eyed face.
Though the other party had employed some disguise, Lumian was certain it was Louis Lund!
Reacting swiftly, Louis Lund, without bothering to ascertain the assailant's identity or motives, seized the reins with his left hand and balled his right hand into a fist. Like a speeding cannonball, he launched an attack at Lumian, who was suspended in midair with no leverage to defend himself.
In that very moment, Louis Lund caught sight of Lumian's unmasked face, his eyes widening in sheer shock.
Undeterred, Lumian didn't evade the blow. Instead, he extended his right arm and caught hold of Louis Lund's fist.
Just as the impending collision seemed inevitable, Lumian retracted his arm, lessening the force behind the strike. Then, with a swift motion, he intertwined Louis Lund's fists, wrists, and forearms as though he had boneless limbs. As a result, Louis Lund was sent flying backward but remained within the confines of the carriage.
In the blink of an eye, Louis Lund saw a smile on Lumian's face.
Whack!
Franca materialized on the opposite side of the carriage driver's seat, her palm poised to strike Louis Lund's ear.
Under the formidable Beyonder powers unleashed by an Assassin's full-strength blow, Louis Lund succumbed to unconsciousness without uttering a single sound.

Chapter 204: Interrogation

With a swift movement, Lumian used the force of Louis Lund's fall to gracefully land in the spot where the carriage driver had been stationed.

Franca had already taken over from Louis Lund, expertly maneuvering the horse and bringing the carriage to a halt by the darkened roadside.

Their coordination was flawless, even without prior communication. One focused on the front while the other ambushed from behind. In a matter of seconds, they managed to overpower Louis Lund, a powerful Beyonder at Sequence 8.

"Carry him into the carriage," Franca instructed, her experience evident as she contemplated the subsequent course of action.

Lumian didn't object and lifted Louis Lund into the rented four-wheeled carriage.

Franca followed suit, closing the carriage door behind her. Then, she removed her hood and black robe, seemingly preparing to change into more comfortable attire upon returning home.

Halfway through her task, she caught Lumian's puzzled gaze and snapped out of her reverie. Awkwardly, she instructed, "Turn around."

Lumian could deduce Franca's intentions and quickly obliged, diverting his gaze out the window to allow her the privacy she required.

A rustling sound continued for over a minute behind him.

"I'm done," Franca's clear voice reached his ears.

The rental carriage wasn't particularly spacious. Lumian, standing at over 1.8 meters tall, hunched over slightly and turned back.

Franca now wore a red vest, a white tie, and a blue gown adorned with a row of yellow buttons. Holding a waxed hat and a horsewhip, she presented an unusual blend of mismatched elements—an absurd and peculiar beauty—with her sharp nose, slightly flamboyant brown eyebrows, thin red lips, and vivid lake-colored eyes.

"Quite swift, Miss Franca," Lumian praised, acknowledging her as the "new" driver for the Empire Carriage Company.

"That's professionalism for you! If these buttons hadn't been so time-consuming, I could have been even faster," Franca muttered as she tucked her flaxen-colored hair beneath the waxed hat.

With her disguise complete, she retrieved an eyebrow pencil and other items she carried and quickly applied some simple makeup. Her complexion darkened, and her eyebrows were made to appear untidy, successfully transforming her into an ordinary-looking

man who wouldn't attract undue attention in the dimly lit streets illuminated by the crimson moon and streetlamps.
"I'll be the carriage driver. You interrogate him," Franca declared, opening the door and hopping out to assume Louis Lund's former seat.
She took hold of the reins and guided the horse to turn slowly.
Satisfied that the rental carriage was moving steadily, Lumian assisted Louis Lund to the opposite seat. Extracting a bottle of truth serum he had obtained from the unscrupulous Hedsey, he compelled Louis to consume a third of it.
As the drug began to take effect, Lumian resisted the urge to wake the unconscious Louis Lund with the ritual silver dagger. Instead, he gently prodded the area between the bridge of the nose and lips, tugged at a strand of his hair, and lightly tickled his nostrils with the strand. Gradually, Louis Lund stirred from his slumber.
Throughout this process, Lumian maintained a friendly and non-threatening posture, refraining from dislocating his captive's joints or binding his hands and feet.
Achoo!
Louis Lund sneezed and abruptly awakened from his slumber.
He glanced across at Lumian, who sat at ease with a smile playing on his lips.
"You!" Louis Lund exclaimed, a mix of shock and recollection flooding his mind.
"Stay calm," Lumian reassured, his smile unwavering as he pressed his right palm down. "If I intended you harm, stray dogs would have already feasted upon you."
Louis Lund's immediate impulse was to employ his powers and make a swift escape. Yet, as he recalled being attacked from behind, he cautiously peered out of the carriage window.
The distant light merged with the surrounding shadows, amplifying the hushed whispers of wheels and hooves upon the road.
Reluctant to gamble on mounting a counterattack, Louis Lund inquired in a low, grave voice, "What is it that you want?"
From his vantage point, Lumian hadn't taken any measures to restrain him, confident in the belief that escape was futile.
The other party may have been careless or vulnerable, presenting an opportunity for Louis Lund to exploit. But such an advantage would never manifest in a direct confrontation.
And the aid accompanying Lumian could strike from the shadows undetected—a force to be reckoned with!
Lumian smiled. "I merely seek to reunite with an old friend."
Louis Lund, dressed only in a linen shirt and shorts, replied with a

dark expression, "I won't succumb to your threats again. Madame is already aware of my past transgressions and has granted me forgiveness."
So I really possessed incriminating information about you? Lumian's mind momentarily swirled with confusion.
Recollections from his dream emerged—a revelation of Louis Lund engaging in an illicit affair with a woman from the village, clandestinely selling portions of the administrator's castle collection in a bid to blackmail him for knowledge of Madame Pualis's involvement with the padre.
In retrospect, those accounts might have been fallacious.
If the padre truly harbored desires for Madame Pualis, it made little sense for him to forsake belief in the evil god symbolizing bountiful harvests, or to forgo birthing several children with her.
Lumian suspected that his dream had crafted an R-rated adaptation of the concealed conflict between the two factions. After all, both the padre and Madame Pualis had numerous lovers, making it easy for his subconscious to forge connections.
Compared to the secrets housed within Madame Pualis's castle, Louis Lund's affair and the pilfering of collections appeared as innocuous as mundane meals thrice daily. There was no ground for him to be subjected to blackmail.
Yet here stood Louis Lund, insisting that he had indeed erred and fallen victim to Lumian's coercion.
"Is that so?" Lumian adopted his Cordu Prankster King persona. "I merely assisted you in concealing your missteps. How can that be construed as a threat?"
Louis Lund erupted in a bitter laugh, a mix of anger and disbelief.
"You are the most shameless individual I have ever encountered.
"I am aware that you uncovered certain irregularities and sought to discern their origins, but you did indeed threaten me and extract information about Madame."
"That's correct. In those days, I entertained the thought of betraying Madame and seeking the padre's assistance. However, that was because I hadn't comprehended the greatness of Mother. I was still a follower of the false god, the Eternal Blazing Sun. Now, my life stems from Mother, and my future belongs to Mother."
Ah, so that's how it is... I must thank this truth serum. You've spilled all that needed to be said, both the necessary and the unnecessary. I didn't have to wrack my brain to gather information... In reality, I sensed something amiss in the village and embarked on a certain investigation? Lumian nodded, satisfied, and smiled. "When did you come to realize the greatness of Mother? Was it after you gave birth to that child?"

Louis Lund looked utterly stunned, his reaction almost causing him to jolt upright and bang his head. "How did you know about me birthing a child? How could you possibly know?"
Hmm... So I wasn't involved in the padre's raid on the administrator's castle? Otherwise, Louis Lund wouldn't be posing such a question... Lumian felt a surge of delight and jestingly responded, "When I undressed you earlier, I noticed stretch marks and a C-section scar on your stomach."
"Impossible!" Louis Lund fiercely objected. "Madame has already erased them!"
Lumian swiftly changed the course of their conversation and inquired with curiosity,
"I'm curious to know how Madame Pualis managed to impregnate you."
Louis Lund, though initially hesitant to answer, couldn't resist the urge to divulge the secret.
"Whether it's a man or a woman, as long as you engage in intimate relations with her and exchange bodily fluids, she can conceive a child according to her desires."
I see... Lumian breathed a sigh of relief.
His greatest concern had been the possibility of Madame Pualis employing her Beyonder abilities to remotely impregnate him.
"So, both men and women will do, but what about animals?" Lumian pressed on.
Louis Lund was taken aback by the question. After a few moments, he responded, "That should work too..."
"And what about plants? Or rocks?" Lumian's inquiry turned scholarly.
"I... I don't know," Louis Lund admitted, unable to provide a definitive answer.
Madame has never contemplated such possibilities. Why does this youngster possess such a vivid imagination?
Regretfully, Lumian changed the subject.
"Since you conceived through the exchange of bodily fluids, how did you end up with that bird's nest-like thing in your stomach?"
"How do you know about it? When did you see it?" Louis Lund asked, astonished.
"I'll tell you later," Lumian swiftly lied, maintaining his composure without a flicker of hesitation.
Louis Lund wore a perplexed expression as he muttered, his face clouded with confusion, "It came along with the conception of the child. It's like a fruit. The outer layer is the epidermis, and the fetus is the pulp. They were once joined together and only split open when ripe."

"Sounds quite magical. That bird's nest seems to possess great spiritual value. Can it be utilized in the realm of mysticism?" Lumian deliberately rambled, skillfully diverting the conversation away from his true intentions.
"It serves as a key ingredient in a certain healing potion," Louis Lund continued, speaking without pause. "It has various other uses as well, like enhancing the condition of human skin and providing power to spells..."
After he finished, Lumian let out a nonchalant sigh.
"Did your first child perish in the padre's assault on the castle?"
"Yes, he was still so young," Louis Lund lamented the loss of life. "During that time, the padre had many followers with him. We kept retreating, and a few Gardeners and a Heretic Spellmaster lost their lives. If Madam hadn't returned in time, we wouldn't have escaped. Sigh, all those children were killed."
"How many people did the padre bring?" Lumian casually inquired, concealing his true concerns.
Louis Lund recollected and replied, "Some were shepherds originally, like Pierre Berry, Niort Best, and the others. Some were the padre's mistresses, such as Sybil Berry, Madonna Bénet, and Philippa Guillaume. The rest were Pons Bénet and his gang. We managed to kill a few of them, including the rather formidable Niort Best..."
In my dream, Niort Best was slain by the three sheep... So in reality, he died during the raid on the administrator's castle? And I wasn't among the individuals mentioned by Louis Lund... In other words, the battle scenes I witnessed were derived from a fragment of my soul? Thus, they are incomplete and unable to reveal the full picture and all the participants... Lumian felt a sense of relief and smiled as he asked, "Where did Madame Pualis go?"

Chapter 205: Banshee

Louis Lund shook his head.
"I've got no idea, but when Madame came back, she wasn't well either."
"Then she saw the castle in ruins and the important items destroyed. She gathered the remaining ones and prepared to leave Cordu."
Based on what I witnessed, it seems that Madame Pualis had indeed been engaged in a fight with someone else. Lumian asked with curiosity, "Why didn't Madame Pualis try to bring the dead back to life?"
Louis Lund looked at Lumian, surprised.
"I never told you any of that..."
In other words, he wanted to know how Lumian had this knowledge.
Lumian smiled but offered no explanation.
Louis Lund couldn't contain his urge to spill the secret.
"Madame can resurrect the dead and restore their bodies, but it's far from perfect. The resurrected ones aren't quite human anymore. They're part corpse, part monster. They only retain fragments of their original memories and can only exist for seven days."
Madame Pualis's resurrection ability is severely flawed at this level... Lumian was disappointed.
He diverted the topic.
"What did Madame Pualis want in Cordu?"
Louis Lund looked puzzled. "Didn't I already tell you?"
Lumian was prepared and smiled as he replied, "Given what happened afterward, I believe you might have a different perspective now."
Louis Lund felt the need to share the information, so he sighed and said, "Back then, I couldn't comprehend it. I was even scared. That's why I dropped hints to the padre during Mass, hoping for assistance."
"Yes... I later discovered that Madame wanted to create an entirely new world in Cordu. In this world, when humans die, their souls return to the earth and roam the wilderness. On special occasions, they can return home and experience the joy of reunion. By redeeming their sins, they can be reborn, emerging from the Mother's womb as human fetuses."
"Paramita?" Lumian remembered the term from his dream.
"Yes!" Louis Lund replied, fear evident in his eyes.
He suspected that Lumian had asked the question to gauge his

reaction.
Lumian knew the correct answer and sought to determine if Louis Lund was lying or how much of his story was false.
"Why establish Paramita?" Lumian pressed further.
He could only inquire about it from Louis Lund, not Madame Pualis.
Louis Lund shook his head slowly.
"Madame briefly mentioned it, but it was very vague.
"She said she had only established a small, caricature Paramita, a part of the complete Paramita. She also mentioned that by creating her own Paramita, she could please the Mother and bear more."
A part? What would happen if those Madames managed to create a complete Paramita? Lumian wondered if constructing a miniature Paramita was a prerequisite for their unusual path towards godhood.
He gazed at Louis Lund, attempting to inquire, "What is Madame Pualis's Sequence now?"
"Madame's condition is rather peculiar. It might be related to the destruction of her Paramita or something else she possesses," Louis Lund replied, catching himself mid-sentence.
Why can't I control my words? Why did I say what I shouldn't have?
Louis Lund realized that his behavior had likely been influenced by one of Lumian Lee's Beyonder powers.
Now understanding the cause, he no longer blamed himself or felt anxious. He felt a sense of relief and relaxation.
"Madame should be somewhere between Sequence 5 and Sequence 4. At times, she exudes an imposing aura that makes people afraid to meet her gaze. Other times, she lacks such grandeur."
It's reminiscent of the state Madame Pualis displayed in my dream... Lumian recalled and stated, "Sequence 9 Villain, Sequence 8 Gardener, Sequence 7 Heretic Spellmaster, Sequence 6 Sower... What comes after Sequence 5? And what about Sequence 4? What lies beyond that?"
He knows more than I anticipated... Witnessing Lumian Lee divulge so much information about the pathway's Sequences in one go, Louis Lund didn't dare take any risks. Yielding to his desire to confide in him, he responded, "Banshee is Sequence 5, and Evil Overlord, also known as Benevolent Overlord or Madame, is Sequence 4. I don't know what lies beyond that. I'm merely a Gardener. I don't possess the right to receive any further boons and advance to become a Heretic Spellmaster."
Banshee... The name implies a change in gender... Pulitt became Pualis... Titles like Madame Moon and Madame Night symbolize godhood and demigods, but Madame Pualis doesn't precisely fit the

role of Madame Night... Lumian pondered for a moment before steering the conversation back to Cordu.
"Were Madame Pualis's initial followers in the village mostly lovers and the elderly?"
"That's correct," Louis Lund affirmed, nodding. "People like Naroka, who were quite old, yearned deeply for their departed loved ones. They longed to see them again and worry about what awaits them after death. They experience both fear and longing. That's the aid Madame can provide them. Unfortunately, Naroka passed away suddenly before fully embracing Paramita. Madame suspects that she discovered the padre's scheme and was killed by her youngest son, who follows the padre."
That explains it... Lumian gained new insight into Naroka's death from his dream.
Her demise was the result of being silenced.
Ava and Reimund likely met the same fate.
Sighing, Lumian changed the subject.
"When did you realize something was amiss with the padre?"
Louis Lund contemplated for a moment and replied, "In early January, I caught sight of the children in the castle tower. You can't fathom what it was like. To put it briefly, it terrified me and nearly drove me insane. I was desperate to leave Madame.
"Initially, I believed she was just like those mystical fanatics who enjoy purchasing magazines like Psychic and Lotus and engaging in futile practices. I didn't think there was anything wrong. However, as time went on, I noticed that the other residents of the castle were becoming increasingly peculiar. The administrator locked himself and Madame in their rooms on two separate occasions, coinciding with the birth of a child each time. My valets and maids often did the same, and Madame was remarkably understanding of their behavior.
"From time to time, the distant cries of a baby reached my ears, causing deep suspicion to well up within me. Seizing the opportunity presented by Madame's absence and the others' lack of vigilance, I stealthily slipped into the tower. Oh, Mother, the sight that greeted me was utterly terrifying!"
Louis Lund, originally intending to speak of Guillaume Bénet's abnormal behavior, found himself unable to contain his thoughts on the castle tower incident, and he began to ramble.
Lumian could vividly imagine the scene, for he had witnessed it in his dream: human children with bird-like claws, sprawled against the walls, densely packed and scattered throughout.
Louis Lund gulped nervously and continued his account, "I initially dropped hints to the padre during Mass. Later, I took the

opportunity to reveal Madame's abnormality to him. I suspected she might be a follower of an evil deity. He instructed me to keep it hidden and not expose myself, assuring me that he would handle the situation.
"It was around mid-January when things took a turn for the worse. The padre continued his normal routine as if nothing was amiss. Despite my repeated urging, you eventually discovered the truth and threatened me.
"After that, Sewell, the carriage driver, and I received a revelation. We repented and wholeheartedly pledged ourselves to Madame.
"Then, in March, the padre suddenly launched an attack on the castle with a group of people."
Louis Lund has limited knowledge about the padre's situation. When Lumian inquired further about what had transpired in Cordu, Louis Lund seemed unfamiliar with the village's circumstances. This aligned with his role as the castle's butler, primarily tending to matters in Darième and other cities.
He only mentioned that since January, the villagers of Cordu had been frequently discussing horoscopes, believing that it would bring them glory and alter their destinies. Prior to that, they merely followed certain folk traditions to ward off any changes in their fate. Specific discussions regarding these matters were rare.
With the understanding that former administrator Béost and Madame Pualis's lady's maid, Cathy, were now Heretic Spellmasters, and that Madame Pualis had left Cordu before Lent, Lumian realized he wouldn't glean any more information from Louis Lund.
Knowing when to stop, Lumian posed a direct question, "Where does Madame Pualis reside now?"
"In Quartier de Noël..." Louis Lund instinctively moved to cover his mouth but added another detail. "Rue de Scotch Broom..."
Rue de Scotch Broom in Quartier de Noël... A map of Trier from a magazine article flashed through Lumian's mind.
Quartier de Noël lay northeast of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, divided by the Srenzo River. It was renowned for its numerous hospitals, including the Veterans' Home and Wounded Soldiers' Hospital. Additionally, being situated in the suburbs, it boasted a fair share of farmland.
Lumian refrained from pressuring Louis Lund or intensifying his desire to extract more information. Instead, he smiled and said, "I bear no ill intentions towards Madame. I merely wish to speak with her about the events in Cordu.
"I will allow you to depart. Please inform Madame Pualis that if she is willing to meet with me, she can choose the time and place.

Ah, please send your response to Room 302, 9 Rue des Pavés, Quartier du Jardin Botanique, before tomorrow night."
It was a safe house Lumian had prepared in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, and now it would finally serve its purpose.
Louis Lund let out a sigh of relief before responding cautiously, "Got it."
Anxious thoughts plagued him, fearing that Lumian might allow him to depart only to trail behind him. Yet, considering Lumian's evident capability to uncover Madame's precise whereabouts without pressing the issue, Louis Lund found himself compelled to place his trust in Lumian's amicability.
He then gestured towards his shorts and remarked, "I cannot leave dressed like this."

Chapter 206: Communication

Lumian's head pounded at the mere thought of Franca coming in and undressing. He scrutinized Louis Lund, who was left in a linen shirt and white shorts, and offered a genuine suggestion.

"I can ask my companion to return the money from your coat. Leave the carriage as it is and find a clothing store. Tell them you encountered a twisted robber. I'm certain everyone in Trier will understand."

Louis Lund's expression froze for a moment as he pointed downwards from Lumian's current position. "I have spare clothes."

Lumian bent down and retrieved a black formal suit with a vest and bow tie.

It seemed to be Louis Lund's usual attire as a butler.

"Is this rental carriage truly yours?" Lumian inquired curiously as he tossed the formal suit to Louis Lund.

"I rented the clothes and the carriage." Louis Lund hurriedly put on his pants.

Lumian sat there, patiently waiting for him to dress before calling out to Franca to stop the carriage by the roadside.

He opened the door, turned around, and waved at Louis Lund.

"Hope to see you again."

If not, I'll find you on Rue de Scotch Broom in Quartier de Noël. And if you've already vanished, I'll continue my investigation, ensuring you'll never find peace.

Lumian would have trailed Louis Lund until he tracked down Madame Pualis if it weren't for his caution regarding her abilities and characteristics, as well as his intention to engage in a friendly conversation with her.

Franca placed the waxed hat and whip on the driver's seat of the carriage, picked up the black robe beside her, and put it on. Then, she pulled up her hood and leaped into the shadows by the road.

Once Louis Lund steered the carriage away from the street, she emerged from the shadows and approached Lumian. She gazed in his direction and spoke. "Not following him?"

"No need. For now, we're not enemies." Lumian averted his gaze and headed towards Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Franca followed, a smile gracing her lips.

"Aren't you concerned that Madame Pualis might refuse to see you and disappear overnight?"

Lumian and Louis Lund didn't purposely lower their voices during their exchange. An assassin possessed sharp ears and eyes, so she caught most of their conversation. While she couldn't fully grasp the Cordu-related details due to her lack of prior knowledge, she

gleaned plenty about other topics.
For instance, Lumian sought an audience with Madame Pualis. For instance, a certain evil god's pathway would transform into a Banshee at Sequence 5...
Lumian took two deep breaths to calm his lingering, trembling emotions.
"I simply believe it's more likely to meet Madame Pualis if I display friendliness rather than tailing Louis Lund.
"She knows full well whom I seek revenge against. Her own castle was damaged by the padre and she was driven out of Cordu. I refuse to believe she bears no grudge.
"Heh heh, I did kill two leaders of the Poison Spur Mob and tamper with 'Black Scorpion' Roger's coffee, but they don't know Lumian Lee was behind it. There's no conflict between hating Ciel and meeting Lumian Lee."
Franca couldn't help but chuckle.
"You're right. What does their vendetta against Ciel have to do with you, Lumian?"
She murmured to herself, lost in thought, "What's Madame Pualis's connection to the Poison Spur Mob? Which evil deity does the Banshee pathway belong to? Are 'Black Scorpion' Roger, 'Baldy' Harman, and 'Short-legged Candlestick' Castina associated with this pathway? One Spellmaster Heretic and two Gardeners?"
She speculated based on her understanding of the Poison Spur Mob.
Lumian didn't hold back any information.
"The mastermind behind the Poison Spur Mob is Madame Moon, but it seems she has recently made further progress. She and Madame Night, whom Pualis represents, are part of a secret organization called the Nightstalkers. They worship the Great Mother. I don't know the precise name, nor do I dare to utter it."
The concealed entity known as Inevitability could corrupt people merely by knowing about it. The Great Mother, even more sinister and fearsome than Inevitability, had her followers locked in a prolonged conflict against the Blessed of Inevitability in Cordu. So, she was certainly capable of doing the same.
Lumian suspected that if he were to learn the Great Mother's complete and honorific name, there was a high chance he would become pregnant on the spot.
Franca found herself deeply intrigued.
"Indeed, it's best not to seek knowledge beyond one's boundaries.
"There was once a member of our research society who enjoyed delving into secrets and acquiring all kinds of mystical knowledge. Eventually, he vanished and was never seen again."

Franca pragmatically shifted the topic to "Black Scorpion" Roger and the others, along with their respective abilities. Lumian provided detailed explanations. After all, he still had to rely on Madame Hidden Blade to combat the Poison Spur Mob.
When Lumian speculated that one of the abilities of a Sower was to impregnate others, Franca felt a momentary envy and eagerly exclaimed, "If Gardner were to become pregnant, it would be quite interesting..."
"Madame, your thoughts are perilous. I truly worry that you might embrace the mantra of 'Life is short, why not give it a try?' and end up choosing to believe in that Great Mother, praying for Her to bestow upon you the power of a Sower," Lumian mockingly warned.
The combination of a Demoness and a Sower was too wicked. Trier would undoubtedly witness a large number of victims.
Franca was taken aback.
"I've already consumed a potion and become a Beyonder. I can't accept any more boons, can I...?"
You don't know? That's fortunate! Lumian sincerely replied, "I don't believe so."
"Don't worry. I possess extensive knowledge of mysticism and understand that every evil deity harbors malicious intentions." Franca sighed softly, setting an example for herself.
She glanced over at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman nearby and casually remarked, "When I was waiting for Louis Lund earlier today, I witnessed an unlucky fellow."
Unlucky fellow? Lumian's heart stirred as he recollected.
"Was he a slender man in his fifties with blond hair and blue eyes?"
"How did you know?" Franca was taken aback. "He was strolling along the street when a vase suddenly dropped from the balcony above and struck his head. He reacted swiftly, managing to dodge to the side of the road. However, he stumbled on the edge of the curb and lost his balance. At that very moment, a public carriage was about to collide with him. Heh heh, he's certainly no ordinary person. Despite the circumstances, he evaded it with a remarkably nimble move. And then, guess what? He collided with a gas street lamp pole, causing his nose to bleed."
After recounting the humorous scene she had witnessed that afternoon, Franca turned her gaze to Lumian, awaiting his response to her inquiry.
Lumian paused, contemplating her question.
"That individual should be Monsieur Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré. He is in cahoots with the pervert known as Hedsey,

who attacked Jenna.
"I suspect he is a Beyonder. I had previously informed the Eternal Blazing Sun Church of the anomaly through intermediaries, but they found nothing amiss. Recently, I acquired a Bad Luck charm and seized an opportunity to use it on him. I intended for him to experience frequent misfortunes and thereby expose his abnormality.
"Unfortunately, his performance went unnoticed by official Beyonders."
But given that tramp's luck, Monsieur Ive would likely suffer from misfortune for another two or three days.
Franca's expression darkened as she stated, "Indeed, it's clear that he is a Beyonder.
"So, it's the group that attacked Jenna... You should have informed me earlier! I could have found someone to help draw greater attention from the authorities to this fellow named Ive!"
Recalling the eradicated mirror people, Lumian focused on the depraved Hedsey, Monsieur Ive, Susanna Mattise, and Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
"The abilities of their pathway are quite intriguing..." Franca couldn't help but sigh. "When I first delved into mysticism, everyone told me that there were only twenty-two divine pathways. However, in the past two to three years, peculiar Sequences have occasionally emerged. Do evil gods fall outside the realm of divine pathways?"
After a brief pause, Franca said to Lumian, "I will report this to the authorities through my contacts, but we mustn't be careless. Remember, always remain vigilant and be prepared for any unforeseen circumstances. Indeed, when the time comes, we may have to collaborate and take action. I will inform you once we have communicated.
"Not bad. Now you know how to seek assistance from me. Don't fret; when I find myself in trouble, I will come to you."
"Okay." Lumian nodded gently.
...
After bidding Franca farewell, Lumian made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.
He still remembered the issue with Termiboros. Once inside Room 207, he retrieved the memo and read it carefully before composing a letter to Madam Magician.
In the letter, he primarily addressed two concerns. Firstly, he detailed the temptation and subsequent influence of Termiboros upon receiving the Alms Monk boon. Secondly, he informed Madam Magician that he had sought assistance from the

Psychiatrist and could now avoid reciting the corresponding honorific name.
Thanks to Monsieur Ive hiring a regular cleaning lady, the motel had become less infested with bedbugs. Lumian swiftly tidied up the surroundings, arranged the altar, and summoned the doll-like blond messenger.
The messenger surveyed the room and seemed satisfied with Lumian's decision to change the summoning location.
Approximately thirty minutes later, she materialized in Room 207 and placed the reply on the wooden table. Tilting her chin slightly, she addressed Lumian, "You should be grateful. I helped remind Madam Magician and ensured she read your letter promptly."
"Thank you," Lumian replied reflexively, momentarily caught off guard.
It was only after the messenger had departed that Lumian snapped out of his daze. He picked up the neatly folded square letter and unfolded it.
"I am pleased to hear that your treatment is proving effective. I did not expect that entity to dispatch an angel. What a significant investment.
"In recent years, evil gods have indeed been infiltrating more frequently, but it remains challenging for higher-level powers to enter our world. The number of angels can be counted on one hand. Three of them were destroyed in transit, causing only a small area of corruption. While one succeeded, an orthodox god intervened and rectified the situation.
"In other words, you are the only unfortunate individual in the entire world."

Chapter 207: Organization

Lumian paid no mind to Madam Magician's usual playful jabs and instead focused on her account of the evil god's infiltration.

It aligned with the information shared by the late "Hammer" Ait.

For unrecognized evil gods hailing from other realms, providing godhood boons proved to be an arduous task. Numerous obstacles hindered Their progress. They had to rely on covert followers to perform elaborate rituals on a grand scale, which often drew attention and resulted in swift annihilation before they could infiltrate.

Madam Magician painstakingly detailed various examples, showcasing the immense difficulty angelic entities faced when descending into the mortal plane. In recent years, there had been only five instances, with four failures and one partial success. While gaining a measure of godhood without reaching angelic status seemed somewhat easier, such cases were rare and generally unsuccessful.

Though Madam Magician didn't explicitly mention it, Lumian suspected that the Great Mother, the Mother Tree of Desire, and the enigmatic fog possessed extraordinary infiltration capabilities, surpassing other entities based on "Hammer" Ait. It seemed likely that these three were responsible for most successful instances involving the acquisition of godhood powers.

Does Madam Magician remain unaware or does she deem it unnecessary for me to know at this stage? Lumian pondered momentarily, inclined to believe the latter.

He continued perusing Madam Magician's response.

"This actually bodes well. Dealing with an angel who serves a hidden entity is much simpler than confronting angelic powers derived from said hidden entity. The associated risks are also significantly reduced.

"Once you ascend to the rank of an angel and extract powers of equal magnitude from that fellow with the long name, thereby rendering Him exceedingly vulnerable, you can implore my Lord to undo the seal and set Him free. Then, you can give Him a thorough thrashing and either transform Him into a Sealed Artifact or restore Him to His original Beyonder characteristics.

"Naturally, this hinges upon Him truly being an angelic entity and not a puppet blessed with a boon. Puppets are easier to handle. Once you extract a certain measure of His power, He will crumble. However, the remaining power bearing the mark of the hidden entity is what presents a greater challenge. You must maintain the seal and gradually absorb it until it reaches a level manageable by

an angel.
"Doesn't it all seem to be progressing smoothly with a high likelihood of success? Ah, but the most vexing and formidable step lies in becoming an angel.
"In your present state, I lack confidence. Were it not for the uniqueness of the current era, 99% or more of the Beyonders would never come close to touching godhood.
"I believe your Psychiatrist has already enlightened you on how to evade the negative effects of Termiboros. No further elaboration is necessary.
"I simply wish to remind you that should you undertake any critical or perilous endeavors in the future, do write to me beforehand and apprise me of the situation.
"Why do I suggest you write before exploiting that lengthy-named fellow? Because you might be clandestinely influenced and neglect the corresponding dangers, forgetting to notify me. As for Termiboros, He will not let you forget my warning, for it would mean you engaging in numerous hazardous exploits and facing a high risk of losing your life. That is clearly not what He desires or strives for.
"If you were to perish, the seal would be affected, but my lord would be alerted. In that event, I shall gather a team to reinforce the seal and eliminate Him.
"With such a skilled angel of fate sealed within you, your future is destined to be quite 'exciting.' Praise the lord. You are akin to bait for the followers of evil gods, Hunters, and Demonesses. You shall embark on a multitude of experiences. If you find the time and inclination, do consider writing a lengthy letter to share with me.
"And now, with the assistance of the two Psychiatrists, you can express your desire to alter your faith to Mr. K during a forthcoming gathering. Remember, before you set off to attend the event, offer prayers to my lord for the angel's protection."
Lumian read the note patiently, finding Madam Magician's words both abundant and yet empty.
The most valuable part was her guidance on evading Termiboros's influence and the reminder to seek her opinion before utilizing the angel's power. Additionally, she provided a beautifully drawn blueprint that offered a chance to address the corruption within his body at the angelic level.
Lumian burned the note by rubbing his spirituality. He then reached into his pockets, touching the hidden banknotes and coins, before leaving Room 207 and making his way to Room 305.
Anthony Reid had already returned to his lodgings and sat by the bedside, dressed as a clerk.

Observing Lumian unlatch the door and enter, he offered a simple explanation, "I couldn't find the target at the back entrance of 126 Avenue du Marché. However, I recently discovered that he had already left through the main door, with you following him."
Lumian produced 400 verl d'or worth of banknotes and handed them over to Anthony Reid.
At the same time, he nodded slightly and stated, "The commission is over."
"It seems you've already encountered the target," Anthony Reid chuckled.
Taking a moment to consider, he inquired, "Can I report the target's information to the authorities?"
"Wait for a week," Lumian replied. He had initially planned to offer Anthony Reid more money to delay claiming the reward from the wanted poster. However, since he sought his opinion, Lumian took advantage of the situation by setting a time limit.
He worried that any investigation or arrest related to Louis Lund might alert Madame Pualis, potentially jeopardizing their meeting.
Anthony Reid did not object and let out a sigh. "You're more suited for the market district than I initially thought."
He had never witnessed a wanted criminal rise to become a leader of a sizable mob so swiftly without being detected by the authorities.
"Competent individuals can thrive anywhere, just like you," Lumian advised Anthony Reid, casting a casual glance around Room 305.
His eyes fell upon a few folded papers on the wooden table near the window. They appeared thicker and smoother, larger than ordinary oil paintings.
What could they be? Lumian focused his gaze for a moment, realizing that the folded papers had a faint bluish hue and a printed texture.
Instantly, the pieces fell into place.
The posters on the wall!
Posters of parliamentary candidates had been plastered all over the place recently!
"You seem particularly invested in the National Convention election," Lumian didn't hold back his speculation as he taunted Anthony Reid. "Do you have a legitimate occupation?"
One of the fundamental eligibility criteria for the elections.
Anthony Reid calmly smiled and replied, "No."
He did not elaborate on his reasons for collecting the parliamentary candidates' posters.
Another commission? Lumian decided not to delve further. He

waved his hand dismissively and left Room 305.
Amidst the lunatic's piercing cries, Lumian descended the stairs, left Auberge du Coq Doré, returned to Salle de Bal Brise, and settled at the bar counter.
"Good evening, Boss," the bartender greeted with deference, straightening his posture.
Lumian nodded.
"Give me a glass of absinthe."
Having thought about Cordu too often that day, he needed a dose of psychedelic bitterness to jolt his senses awake.
On the stage, Jenna performed with exaggerated flair, belting out flashy songs. Leaning against the bar counter, Lumian let his gaze wander as he absorbed every note.
Now and then, he would take a sip of the dreamy green liquid, allowing its bitterness to awaken his nerves.
Once he regained composure, he organized the recent matters he had to attend to.
First, there was Mr. K's mission; second, the looming threat from the Poison Spur Mob; third, Susanna Mattise's second assault; and fourth, his upcoming meeting with Madame Pualis.
Regarding the election, Lumian didn't pay it much mind after confirming from Franca that the Savoie Mob also backed Hugues Artois. This meant that even if the opposing party won, it wouldn't entirely suppress the Savoie Mob or impede his mission.
Susanna Mattise's resurgence had been a cause for concern, but thanks to the psychiatric treatment, Lumian wouldn't hesitate to seek assistance from Franca. Resolving this matter had become relatively manageable.
Once official Beyonders committed to the task, they wouldn't be inferior to Lumian, a Sequence 8, in effectiveness. They would undoubtedly uncover Monsieur Ive's issues and the troubles at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, purging Susanna Mattise's evil spirit completely.
This would be accomplished within the next few days. Lumian simply needed to remain vigilant.
Mr. K's mission was rather complex, relying on Gardner Martin. Lumian, not being a Spectator Beyonder, could only attempt to gain the target's approval through repeated efforts. There were no shortcuts for the time being, so rushing was unnecessary.
Similarly, he had to await Madame Pualis's response. Lumian couldn't rush the matter even if he desired to.
Upon analyzing the situation, Lumian concluded that he needed to prioritize dealing with the Poison Spur Mob's threat.
After the election, "Black Scorpion" Roger would receive an

additional boon from Madame Moon, ascending to the rank of a Sower. "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina might even advance to the level of Heretic Spellmasters. At that point, Lumian, their primary target, would be defenseless against them. Even with the support of Franca, Baron Brignais, and his allies, the situation would be perilous.

Should I join forces with Franca before the election concludes and infiltrate 126 Avenue du Marché under the cover of darkness to eliminate the remaining leaders of the Poison Spur Mob? Even if Madame Moon sends reinforcements later, by the time they stabilize the situation, I would have earned the Boss's trust and gained a chance to partially withdraw from the market district...

The problem lies in facing a Heretic Spellmaster on their home turf. Even with Franca and me united, defeating him would be a daunting task, not to mention his potential allies...

Perhaps an opportunity will arise to strike at "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina when they are outside? Lumian pondered as he spotted Charlie, attired as a waiter, approaching the bar counter with a tray.

Nodding in greeting, Lumian instinctively honed in on Charlie's luck.

In an instant, his grasp on the absinthe glass tightened, and his pupils dilated.

He "saw" Charlie's luck stained with blood, a swirling blend of crimson and ebony that sent a shiver down his spine.

This could only mean that Charlie was on the brink of a life-threatening catastrophe within the next two to three days, or perhaps even within the next 24 hours!

Chapter 208: Countermeasure

Could Susanna Mattise's attack be imminent? Lumian pondered this question, considering that Charlie had no known enemies and had recently worked as a waiter at Salle de Bal Brise.

Though it was possible that Charlie had simply experienced a string of unfortunate accidents, Lumian wasn't willing to take any chances.

As Charlie carefully placed the tray down and waited, he grew uneasy under Lumian's gaze.

Recalling the other's mystical prophetic ability, Charlie leaned in and whispered, "Did you see something?"

A smile spread across Lumian's face.

"I foresee a romantic encounter in your future. You'll form a relationship that goes beyond friendship with a beautiful woman."

"Is that true?" Charlie asked, surprised and delighted.

The woman's name is Susanna Mattise... Lumian chuckled, suppressing his words. "You're quite gullible, aren't you? How can you believe that?"

"I knew it..." Charlie looked disappointed.

The presence of the Idiot Instrument had already revealed to him Ciel's knack for deception.

Lumian's smile faded as he watched Charlie make his way to the edge of the dance floor, carrying a tray filled with glasses.

Thoughts raced through Lumian's mind.

Am I simply unlucky, or is my fate predetermined? The official Beyonders will soon keep a close watch on Monsieur Ive and the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. They'll arrest all the cultists who believe in the Mother Tree of Desire and locate the evil spirit, Susanna Mattise, to purge her completely. Yet, here I am, facing the possibility of Susanna Mattise launching an attack on me and Charlie today...

Dammit, Termiboros, that pig's son. He must be behind this!

Based on my observations of luck, the problem will likely arise late tonight or perhaps even at midnight the day after tomorrow...

I can't solely rely on Susanna Mattise coming to Charlie and me the day after tomorrow. I must prepare for the worst-case scenario...

Gradually regaining composure, Lumian, influenced by Franca and Jenna's vulgarities, forced himself to remain calm and assess the situation.

Simultaneously, he devised an initial plan of action.

First, he would discreetly alert Charlie, assuming a hidden identity, and instruct him to seek refuge in the nearest Eternal

Blazing Sun cathedral for the next three days.
Second, Lumian would go to Rue des Blouses Blanches and enlist Franca's aid.
With Franca and Mr. K's finger acting as his protectors, Lumian believed he stood a strong chance of surviving Susanna Mattise's initial onslaught. Furthermore, she would not have another opportunity in the future. Whether it was Franca's message to the official Beyonders through her secret channels or Charlie's presence at the cathedral seeking sanctuary, it would be enough to inform the Eternal Blazing Sun Church of Susanna Mattise's reappearance!
Although Lumian could likely handle Susanna Mattise on his own with Mr. K's assistance, since he already owed Franca a favor, why not accrue a little more debt to ensure greater security?
Without hesitation, Lumian finished his absinthe and departed from Salle de Bal Brise.
He returned to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, retrieved the Mystery Prying Glasses, and placed them on the bridge of his nose.
Once again, the world spun, and he descended to the ground. He found himself surrounded by a vast network of brownish-green roots, insects scurrying about, and rats hiding in various corners...
Just as Lumian was about to remove his glasses and begin applying his disguise, his eyes caught sight of a clump of turquoise hair entwined with vines and branches.
Bang!
Lumian's head spun, as if he had been hit, and golden stars danced before his eyes.
In haste, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses, bent down, and retched for a few moments.
Once the wave of nausea subsided, Lumian seized the opportunity while the urge to draw still lingered. He reached for his makeup tools and began applying various substances to his face.
Gazing into the dimly lit windowpane, Lumian found himself increasingly unrecognizable. He resembled one of the unkempt drunkards commonly found in dance halls.
When he finished, he averted his gaze, afraid of the disorienting effects that might follow.
Phew... Lumian put away his makeup tools, exhaled deeply, and filtered through the images he had witnessed while wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses.
One image stood out in particular—an image of turquoise hair entwined with branches and vines. It struck a chord of familiarity within him, and he quickly made a connection.
Susanna Mattise also possessed long, turquoise hair interwoven

with branches and vines that seemed to materialize from nowhere!
Susanna Mattise's territory likely lies somewhere underground in the market district? Lumian made a preliminary judgment.
He couldn't help but grumble, *Why does it have to be underground once again?* Isn't the underground of Trier already bustling enough?
However, this also explained why the official Beyonders had been unable to fully cleanse Susanna Mattise during their previous encounter. Underground monsters were always challenging to eliminate, just like the Montsouris ghost.
Lumian recollected the real Monsieur Ive's clandestine visit to Underground Trier late at night. He remembered the perverted Hedsey, who had drugged Jenna and led her to an underground cavern. Hedsey seemed familiar with the area and felt at ease there.
This convinced Lumian that Susanna Mattise was indeed hiding somewhere in Underground Trier, not far from the location chosen by Hedsey.
Deeper into the depths of the underground path, all the way to the end perhaps? Lumian speculated as he changed into simple cargo pants, incongruous with his formal top, and left Room 207.
Inside Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian surveyed the surroundings until he spotted Charlie, serving drinks to guests near the periphery of the dance floor.
Leaning closer, Lumian discreetly brushed past Charlie and whispered, "Susanna Mattise."
Amidst Jenna's singing, booming music, and clamorous voices, the name resonated clearly. Charlie froze in place, as if struck by lightning.
Only then did Lumian gently remind him in a hushed tone, "I have received information that Susanna Mattise will reemerge within the next three days. If you wish to avoid a grim fate, seek refuge in the cathedral tonight and remain there for three days."
Charlie's initial reaction was one of horror. His second was to search for Ciel. And his third was to inquire anxiously whether he would be fired for taking three days off.
A lump formed in Charlie's throat as he searched in vain for Ciel. He mustered the courage to ask in a hushed voice, "Really?"
You can choose not to believe it... Lumian managed to restrain his instinctual reaction to prevent Charlie from making any connection.
With a deliberate effort to keep his voice low, he continued, "If you go to the cathedral tonight, someone will confirm the truth for

you."
Charlie's fear became too overwhelming to contain. He scrutinized the unfamiliar face before him and asked with a tremor in his voice, "Who are you?"
And why did you come specifically to warn me?
"Just someone who wishes you well," Lumian responded, borrowing a phrase his sister often used in jest.
Without further explanation, he walked past Charlie, squeezing his way onto the dance floor and swiftly disappearing from view.
Charlie felt as though he had been plunged into winter, his body shivering uncontrollably.
During moments like this, memories of Susanna Mattise's beauty, tenderness, and passion would occasionally flash through his dreams. But every time, those memories would be overshadowed by grotesque images of tree-like warts, blooming flowers, and slimy substances, extinguishing any desire within him. And now, that monster was making a comeback!
I should make my way to Église Saint-Robert! Charlie took a few steps toward the exit with the tray in hand, then halted.
He recalled that it was already late at night, and Avenue du Marché would undoubtedly have very few pedestrians at this hour. Such an environment posed greater danger than the bustling Salle de Bal Brise!
Susanna Mattise always invades my dreams, or it's in the dead of night when everyone is fast asleep. But here, in the dance hall, with so many eyes upon us, she surely won't dare to appear... Once Ciel returns, I'll ask him to escort me to Église Saint-Robert... Charlie withdrew his gaze from the door and decided to wait a little longer.
The dance hall, teeming with various sounds and aromas, offered him a sense of security.
...
3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Having wiped off his makeup, Lumian rapped on Franca's door.
Franca's ponytail had come undone, allowing her flaxen hair to cascade naturally. However, instead of a nightgown, she sported a cotton two-piece pajama set.
Donning summer slippers, she turned to admit Lumian into the room and asked in bewilderment, "Are you here for some mystical knowledge tonight?"
Considering the short time they had been apart—less than two hours—she couldn't think of any other reason.
After Franca closed the door, Lumian spoke with gravity,"Something's happening with Charlie. I suspect Susanna

Mattise will make a reappearance within the next two days, possibly even tonight."
"So soon?" Franca couldn't hide her surprise.
She still hadn't relayed the issues with Susanna Mattise, Monsieur Ive, and Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons to 007!
Lumian nodded.
"Although it's hard to accept, all signs point to my guess being correct."
"What's your plan?" Franca wasted no time discussing the possibilities.
Lumian shared his two courses of action with Franca but refrained from mentioning Mr. K's finger.
Franca regarded him with a smile.
"You're remarkably composed.
"Didn't you tell me before that Susanna Mattise is suspected to be a Sequence 5 malevolent spirit? Even if we join forces, we might not be able to defeat her.
"Tsk, are you placing too much confidence in me, or perhaps too much confidence in yourself?"
Lumian smiled. "Both."
"To have survived the calamity in Cordu, you're undoubtedly extraordinary." Franca sighed and glanced at the wall clock in the house. "If we can make it through the night, there shouldn't be any issues. I'll inform the authorities swiftly through my connections. Wait for me in the living room."
She retreated into her master bedroom and busied herself with something.
Lumian settled on the sofa and directed his gaze at the cuckoo wall clock beside him, silently ticking away the minutes.
Nearly half an hour elapsed before Franca emerged from her room. She had changed into a black robe adorned with leather armor and a hood.
"It's settled. They'll likely launch the operation tomorrow," she informed Lumian, then inquired, "Aren't you concerned that Charlie might encounter trouble on his way to Église Saint-Robert? Even ordinary people can stumble upon malevolent spirits along the roadside in the dead of night."
Église Saint-Robert served as the primary cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, near the Suhit steam locomotive station. The attached cemetery had once occupied the space now occupied by Salle de Bal Brise.
Lumian had already considered this.
"I plan to discreetly follow him to the cathedral after Salle de Bal Brise closes."

"I'll accompany you." Franca furrowed her brow and scrutinized Lumian. "Won't Charlie be at risk in the dance hall? Some evil spirits pay no heed to the presence of others or their numbers."

Given that Susanna Mattise's previous appearances hadn't affected anyone else, Lumian subconsciously believed that she would avoid crowded places. The dance hall was far more crowded than the motel.

Jolted by Franca's reminder, he exclaimed in a deep voice, "Let's hurry back to the dance hall!"

Chapter 209: Bad Luck

Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian scanned the dim-lit dance hall, searching for Charlie, but to no avail. His heart sank. Hastily, he motioned for Louis and Sarkota to come closer.

"What's the matter, Boss?" Louis asked, his voice filled with anxiety.

He assumed that Lumian was dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in the dance hall.

Lumian's eyes wandered across the waiters, all dressed in vests and bow ties. He casually inquired, "Where's Charlie? I need to discuss something with him."

Louis's eyes widened in shock. "Boss, didn't Charlie follow you out just now?"

Charlie followed me? Lumian's pupils contracted, as if he had been struck by a sudden burst of light.

He asked in a deep voice, "When?"

Louis pondered for a moment, confusion evident on his face as he looked at Lumian.

"Less than five minutes ago."

Lumian's gaze shifted to Sarkota, his taciturn and reliable subordinate, who also appeared puzzled.

Five minutes ago? I've been at Rue des Blouses Blanches for over half an hour. Moreover, the last time I left the dance hall, I was disguised as a drunkard. There's no way Charlie could have left with me... Lumian swiftly dismissed the possibility of Charlie leaving the dance hall with him unnoticed.

The situation was growing increasingly bizarre!

Considering Charlie's black ill-fated luck, tinged with crimson red, the probability of him encountering danger was almost 100%!

Suppressing the myriad of thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian said to Louis and Sarkota, "Perhaps someone is impersonating me, but I'm unsure why they would be searching for Charlie."

"Impossible..." Louis blurted out.

A few minutes ago, he and Sarkota had greeted the boss. It couldn't have been a fake!

Before Louis could finish his thought, Lumian shot him a cold glare. Immediately, Louis changed his tune and stammered, "Maybe, maybe it's a fake."

Lumian didn't dwell on the question and inquired, "Did Charlie change his clothes when he left the ballroom?"

According to the rules of Salle de Bal Brise, every waiter, bartender,

chef, and kitchen helper had two sets of uniforms. However, they were not allowed to take them outside of the dance hall; they could only be kept in the changing room on the first floor.
This was due to the cultural environment in the market district. Bartenders and waiters were prone to bankruptcy caused by gambling, alcoholism, illness, and other issues. If they were allowed to take their uniforms home, they would surely pawn them for cash before disappearing. They wouldn't care if Salle de Bal Brise was owned by the mob.
Similarly, in Trier's inexpensive cafés frequented by scavengers, laborers, tramps, and low-level workers, tin utensils and iron chains were used to secure them to the tables. This ensured only a limited range of movement for the customers, preventing them from secretly taking the utensils and selling them.
The more upscale cafés had their own set of troubles. In order to maintain an air of sophistication, they preferred using silver or porcelain utensils. Consequently, the boss had to painstakingly count the utensils after closing each day to check for any missing ones. The waiters were repeatedly instructed to be vigilant about such matters.
"No," Louis firmly replied to Lumian's question.
He had intended to prevent Charlie from leaving the dance hall in a waiter's attire, but since Charlie had already departed with the boss, he wisely kept his mouth shut.
Most of the dance hall's rules applied to waiters, dancers, bartenders, chefs, bouncers, cleaners, and even managers. The boss was exempt from such restrictions!
Lumian nodded slightly and calmly said, "You guys carry on with your tasks."
With that, he made his way toward the changing room near the kitchen.
He suspected that Charlie's disappearance had something to do with Susanna Mattise!
The small changing room was empty. Lumian glanced around and spotted the locker labeled with Charlie's name.
Franca, donned in a black robe and hood, materialized beside Lumian and praised, "You acted swiftly. You knew to seek out a divination medium for me."
"I'm not a fool," Lumian simply replied. He retrieved a piece of wire he always carried and manipulated it a few times before opening Charlie's locker where his clothes were kept.
Franca pondered for a couple of seconds before reaching for Charlie's linen shirt.
She then used a broom that was leaning against the wall outside

the changing room to conduct the divination.
"Charlie's current whereabouts...
"Charlie's current whereabouts...
"..."
Franca held Charlie's clothes in her left hand and pressed her right hand against the top of the broom, murmuring to herself.
Eventually, she released her right hand, but the broom remained motionless. It stood as still as if someone were still holding it.
After a few seconds, it crashed to the ground with a thud.
"Was it interfered with?" Lumian probed.
Franca slowly shook her head.
"Doesn't appear so..."
She swiftly walked over to the full-length mirror in the changing room and stroked its surface a few times.
Holding Charlie's clothes, she commenced another round of divination.
After a few seconds, the mirror darkened, as if reflecting the darkness itself.
In the next moment, two figures materialized, moving in a hazy yellowish light.
One of them vaguely resembled Charlie, dressed as a waiter, while the other bore a resemblance to Lumian from behind.
Apart from that, they couldn't discern any further details.
Franca scrutinized the vision for a few seconds before confidently deducing, "They're underground! That's why the previous divination couldn't provide a clear answer. A broom can't jump and stand on its head, can it?"
Lumian nodded and exited the changing room. He proceeded upstairs to retrieve a carbide lamp and any other useful items he might need later. Then, he swiftly left the dance hall.
He already had a rough idea!
Witnessing the scene, Franca retrieved a glimmering powder from her pocket and combined it with an incantation to conceal herself from view.
On Avenue du Marché, bathed in the eerie glow of the crimson moonlight and gas street lamps, Lumian hastened his pace, scouring the area for any trace or clue.
His destination was the entrance to the underground located in the middle of Avenue du Marché.
Suddenly, amidst the encompassing darkness, Lumian abruptly halted.
He observed that the grills in the drainage ditch had been displaced, and there were disheveled footprints along the roadside.
Near the height of an average person's head, there were signs of

impact.
Franca revealed herself once more and reconstructed the sequence of events. "It seems like he slipped and stumbled while trying to maintain his balance along the gutter. Eventually, he collided with a street lamp... There should have been blood, but it was cleaned up..."
Perplexed, she muttered to herself,
"It bears a resemblance to the unlucky incident I witnessed earlier today..."
At that moment, Franca experienced a sudden realization. "Could that unlucky imposter, Ive, be the one who took Charlie?"
Lumian had long harbored suspicions, but now he was even more convinced.
"If he can masquerade as Monsieur Ive, it follows that he can also assume my identity.
"This ability is quite remarkable..."
At that instant, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place within Lumian's mind.
Susanna Mattise was on the verge of recovering, yet she remained concerned about the official Beyonders' continued surveillance of Charlie. Thus, she enlisted the fake Monsieur Ive to pose as Ciel and discreetly escort Charlie underground, making it appear like an ordinary occurrence. Once they reached Underground Trier, it would prove challenging for the official Beyonders to locate them.
If they lingered any longer, even divination might be thwarted!
"Evading the official Beyonders during their initial investigation would require impressive skills," Franca responded. Foregoing her invisibility, she trailed Lumian to the entrance of underground Trier in the middle of Avenue du Marché.
As the yellowish-blue light from the carbide lamp illuminated the staircase below, Lumian noticed two sets of footprints.
One set was familiar—it belonged to Charlie.
Examining the footprints, it was evident that Charlie was apprehensive about descending into the underground in the dead of night. He treaded cautiously, yet ultimately chose to place his trust in Ciel.
For the time being, there were no signs of him being restrained.
"Idiot..." Lumian cursed under his breath.
It was understandable that he couldn't discern the deception. After all, one was a Beyonder, while the other was an ordinary individual. Nevertheless, they had walked together for quite a distance. Didn't he sense anything awry during their conversation?
Is it truly so effortless to impersonate me, Lumian Lee?

"Thankfully, we have these footprints," Franca sighed with relief.
The simplified dowsing rod divination proved challenging to utilize underground. While it might point in the right direction, there might not be a viable path to follow. It often necessitated lengthy detours, increasing the risk of losing their way in the labyrinthine darkness.
The Witch had not brought any tools to illuminate their path. It was unclear whether she was confident in her ability to remain with Lumian or if she simply disregarded the hindrance of darkness on her vision.
Lumian held the carbide lamp and ascended the stairs, reaching the level where the street and square names were indicated.
He moved swiftly, sometimes choosing a direction before Franca could discern the footprints. Soon enough, they discovered Charlie and the imposter Ive's footprints once again.
Franca felt perplexed. After a brief pause, she couldn't help but inquire, "It seems you know where the imposter Ive is headed?"
"After that pervert knocked Jenna unconscious, he followed the same path," Lumian calmly replied.
This was the route familiar to those individuals, a route that evoked a sense of security. Moreover, it was likely that the imposter Ive was leading Charlie to Susanna Mattise. Susanna might very well be waiting at the end of this path!
Franca refrained from further comment. She utilized the shroud of darkness to partially conceal herself. At times, she scouted ahead, while at others, she watched Lumian's back and flanks.
After several minutes of walking, Lumian and Franca came to a halt.
The area displayed signs of partial collapse. Debris littered the vicinity, and the trails meandered in disarray. Eventually, they led to a small cavity obstructed by rubble.
"The target encountered a minor cave-in and became trapped?" Franca whispered with a hiss. "Is this not excessively unlucky?"
Her gaze then shifted to Lumian.
"Where did you acquire that unlucky charm? Its efficacy seems way too potent."
"I'll procure one for you the next time I come across such misfortune," Lumian responded, uncertain if he would encounter another individual as luckless as the tramp.
As soon as he finished speaking, gravel cascaded from the heap of stones barricading the cave entrance, clattering upon the ground.
In a short while, a passageway was cleared, and a figure emerged cautiously.
With golden-black hair and brilliant light-blue eyes, he possessed a

striking handsomeness—yet another Lumian.

Chapter 210: Performance

Upon glimpsing the two figures lurking in the shadows, the impostor Ive was taken aback. He raised his right hand and pointed accusingly at Lumian, his voice filled with inquiry.

"Who are you? Why are you pretending to be me?"

As he berated, he hastened his pace, pulling himself out of the tunnel and leaping onto level ground.

In the past, Lumian would have charged forward, ready for close combat or drawing his revolver to unleash a barrage of bullets at his foe. He would have granted no opportunity for words. But this time, for some inexplicable reason, he yearned to put on a show. He desired to witness the other party's abilities before seizing the perfect moment to display his own.

Without an adversary, there would be no performance!

Franca shared the same sentiment. She eagerly longed to stand in for Lumian, refraining from an immediate attack.

Behind the impostor Ive stood Charlie, disguised as a waiter. As he crawled through the debris, he caught sight of a figure beneath the dual glow of a carbide lamp and a lantern.

He froze in shock at the confrontation between the two Ciels. For a moment, it felt as though he was trapped in a dream. He couldn't discern who was genuine and who was counterfeit, who aimed to harm him, and who sought to aid him.

The only certainty he held was that danger loomed over him once more!

The impostor Ive assessed Lumian and turned to Franca, his voice laced with anxiety and anger.

"Wake up! You've been deceived by this impostor! When have I ever worn such attire?"

After Lumian warned Charlie, he wiped away his makeup but made no change to his clothing. He still sported an unusual combination of a simple formal top and cargo pants. In comparison, the impostor Ive's white shirt, black vest, brown pants, and laceless leather boots seemed more in line with his usual style.

Franca couldn't resist putting on a performance.

"Is that so? Then enlighten me, what is my code name?"

The impostor Ive asked in exasperation and amusement, "Madame Red Boots, have you forgotten your moniker?"

Franca couldn't help but chuckle.

She took a couple of steps backward, blending into the shadows at the periphery of the carbide lamp's illumination.

The underground, where darkness held sway, was an ideal setting

for Demoness combat!
As the fake Ive beheld the scene, a sense of unease swelled within his heart. He knew all too well that his attempt to masquerade as the genuine article had likely been exposed, leaving him unable to maintain his charade. Instantly, he altered his approach.
Discarding the lantern, he lifted his gaze to meet Lumian's, his countenance growing frigidly cold.
The corners of his mouth curled into a chilling smirk.
"I can't decide whether to pity or congratulate you for seeing through my guise, but this definitely isn't advantageous for you."
With lantern in hand, the fake Ive's aura surged, transforming into a fearsome volcano teetering on the brink of eruption.
Confronting him felt akin to facing the three-headed, six-armed sinister giant of Cordu. Save for the absence of mental torment and physical blows, Lumian's reactions mirrored those of his past encounters.
Quivering, he lowered his head, unable to meet the other's gaze directly. However, his longing to perform and his unwavering resolve compelled him to raise his head, struggling to fix his gaze upon the fake Ive's face.
Simultaneously, the darkness beyond the light seemed cloaked in an eerie green glow. Vines and branches sprouted from the abyss, entwining the ceiling and rocky walls.
Franca, concealed within the shadows, succumbed to intimidation in the face of the fake Ive's aura, rendering her unable to maintain her abilities. Her form materialized less than two meters away from the impostor.
Meanwhile, Charlie, still sprawled within the passageway, trembled even more violently. He buried his face in the gravel and earth, his mind blank.
With a disdainful glance toward Lumian and Franca, the fake Ive spoke. "You dare to pursue me, utterly ignorant? The only fortunate aspect is your considerable attractiveness. I find it hard to dispose of you outright."
His words entered Lumian and Franca's ears, instilling them with fear, compelling them to turn and flee.
This sensation prompted Lumian to realize something profound.
A demigod!
The fake Ive was a demigod, possessing godhood!
Gritting his teeth and summoning his courage, Lumian delved into his pocket, hopeful that Mr. K's finger could serve as a temporary deterrent, buying him and Franca an opportunity to escape the Underground Trier.
So what if you're a demigod? I've encountered demigods before.

Fear won't break my spirit or halt my resistance!
Just as Lumian's right palm was poised to make contact with Mr. K's finger, and Franca was on the verge of fleeing, unable to contain herself, a cracking noise resounded from above.
A rock the size of a fist descended, mirroring the former descent of its brethren, hurtling toward the fake Ive, who had been arrogantly observing Lumian and Franca's reactions.
Caught off guard, the impostor Ive managed only to lower his head, barely evading the projectile. The gravel struck his left shoulder, fracturing bone and causing the flesh to sink inward.
He emitted a brief cry, nearly toppling to the ground.
This unexpected turn of events dispersed the menacing aura and godlike presence, leaving behind a scant few turquoise vines and brownish-green branches as testament to the recent occurrence.
Snapping out of his shock, Lumian, driven by his desire to perform and seizing the opportunity to provoke,
discarded the carbide lamp, clutched his stomach, and erupted in laughter.
"A fake? Is everything about you nothing but fake? Don't tell me that thing of yours is a mere piece of wood?"
The fake Ive, who had just recovered from the pain, was overcome with emotion. His gaze fixated upon Lumian, his eyes tinged with an otherworldly green hue.
Unbeknownst to him, Franca had already sprinkled herself with fluorescent powder, vanishing into thin air with a hushed whisper.
In the blink of an eye, Lumian found himself consumed by an intense yearning for the pleasures of the opposite sex.
If Franca hadn't rendered herself invisible, he would have been utterly powerless against the impulse. However, he wasn't entirely bereft of reason. It was just that his actions had become burdensome, both physically and mentally.
Struggling, Lumian extracted the revolver from its holster, endeavoring to take aim at the fake Ive.
In his current state, he inexplicably found the other's visage profoundly alluring.
Bang!
Lumian squeezed the trigger, but his shot missed the impostor Ive.
Fury ignited within the fake Ive's eyes. With agile grace, he closed in on his target, his hand rising to deliver a resounding slap across Lumian's face.
Instantly, his appearance underwent a subtle alteration, as if he possessed limited control over his image. He softened Lumian's masculine features, lending them a touch of femininity.

Lumian gasped for breath, his finger squeezing the trigger once more.
A tumultuous surge of desire threatened to consume him. He yearned to embrace the female rendition of the fake Ive and indulge in unspeakable acts.
Amidst the maelstrom of his intense emotions, he instinctively recalled the words of the psychiatrist, Madam Susie, and promptly began taking deep, steadying breaths.
Bang!
Lumian found a measure of tranquility, successfully discharging another shot from the revolver.
The fake Ive hadn't anticipated the unwavering fortitude of his adversary, who managed to retain his sanity. Narrowly evading the bullet that grazed his arm, rending his garments and scorching his flesh, he couldn't suppress a pained grunt. In that moment, Lumian, warily mindful of the opponent's abilities, ceased his pretense, seizing the opportunity to grip the ritual silver dagger and plunge it into his own ribs, refraining from extracting it.
The pain jolted his senses, quelling much of his desire.
Likewise, the fake Ive shook off the lingering effects of Provocation, regaining a measure of clarity.
He understood that the current circumstances were ill-suited for an extended confrontation. Swiftly producing a golden coin, he hurled it toward the crevice obstructed by debris.
Lumian, overcome by an uncontrollable avarice, lunged toward the gleaming coin with the ritual silver dagger, eager to claim it as his own.
Seizing the opportunity, the fake Ive sprinted deeper into the underground, displaying swiftness surpassing that of ordinary mortals.
Suddenly, his feet skidded, and a slick swoosh echoed through the air.
Unbeknownst to him, the path had been encased in a layer of frost!
Struggling to regain his footing, the fake Ive endeavored to restore his balance.
However, in that very moment, a towering figure clad in a black robe and hood materialized behind him.
With a swift motion, Franca extended her right hand, revealing a hidden blade enveloped in black flames. She aimed to plunge it into the fake Ive's back, employing the full force of an Assassin's strike.
With a pfft, despite the fake Ive's best efforts to evade and rely on

some kind of performance to toughen his skin and muscles like stone, the blade managed to pierce his body.
His eyes widened, and he twisted his body forcefully, capturing a glimpse of Franca through his ghostly green gaze.
Having successfully executed her attack, Franca intended to take a step back and utilize the shadows to create distance before triggering the detonation of the black flames coursing within the target's body. However, her limbs suddenly grew weak, and she bent over.
She clenched her legs together, a watery light flickering in her eyes resembling a serene lake.
Having anticipated the deep connection between the fake Ive she was tailing and the deviant Hedsey, Franca was prepared for the current circumstances. Without hesitation, she reached into her concealed pocket, aiming to retrieve the smelling salts she had acquired earlier.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
Lumian, having secured the golden coin, discharged three shots at the severely wounded fake Ive.
Desperately attempting to evade, the fake Ive's precarious footing on the icy surface undermined his ability to maintain even basic balance. Eventually, he plummeted to the ground with a resounding thud, one of the bullets piercing his abdomen.
With a chance to catch her breath, Franca inhaled the scent of the salts, the invigorating aroma jolting her senses awake. Suppressing her desires, she clenched her left hand.
Black flames erupted from the fake Ive's body, devouring his soul and eliciting a mournful cry.
Lumian aimed once more and pulled the trigger.
The final bullet erupted forth, instantaneously puncturing the fake Ive's forehead.
With a deafening bang, the fake Ive's head split open, spilling forth crimson and white.
Observing Franca bend over once again, Lumian hurriedly made his way to her side, circling around the frost-covered area.
Franca raised her gaze, her eyes moist as she softly gasped for air.
Suddenly, she embraced Lumian, but her nostrils detected the presence of a metal canister with an open lid pressed against her nose.
The indescribably potent scent compelled her to sneeze repeatedly, diminishing much of her desire.
"Dammit, this stuff is far more potent than smelling salts!" Franca blurted out as soon as she regained consciousness.
Lumian quickly took a sniff himself and let out a sneeze.

Chapter 211: Spirit Channeling

While Lumian sneezed, Franca swiftly took two steps forward and crouched beside the fake Ive's lifeless body.

With a delicate grip, she extinguished the flickering black flames that still clung to it.

"Thank goodness it hasn't burned too far, or the soul would have dissipated," Franca breathed a sigh of relief, straightening up. She reached into her pocket and retrieved a handful of powder that resembled the pitch-blackness of night.

Lumian stowed away the canister of stimulating gas and glanced at Franca, curiosity etched on his face.

"Are you planning to channel his spirit?"

In the recent battle, the fake Ive had displayed the strength of a Mid-Sequence Beyonder and wielded peculiar abilities. Lumian couldn't hold back, or the situation would have taken a perilous turn.

Franca nodded subtly, responding, "Indeed. Channeling a spirit now will yield significant results."

"And which entity do you intend to invoke?" Lumian asked casually.

Franca chuckled before answering, "None. I've merged the principles of Magic Mirror Divination and devised a spirit-summoning spell. While it may not rival the most professional methods, it suffices. Moreover, it won't attract the attention of deities from the corresponding domain."

"You're quite clever," Lumian praised, his words laced with a hint of mockery.

Exasperated yet amused, Franca retorted, "It's called having an academic spirit. We—uh, your sister—have conducted similar research and experiments. Usually, I can't be bothered to overthink things. Not because I lack intelligence, but because the burden of endless calculations is tiresome. The key to life is to remain relaxed and not get entangled in every intricate detail."

Her gaze swept over Charlie, still sprawled amidst the rubble in the tunnel. Franca refrained from mentioning Gandalf, the president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

Is this why you've adapted so well after becoming a woman? Lumian observed Franca building a wall of spirituality in the vicinity as he approached Charlie.

Witnessing Ciel's approach, Charlie snapped out of his daze and crawled out of the debris on all fours.

Lumian gazed at him, his expression devoid of emotion.

What he was thinking was: Charlie has just witnessed the battle

between Franca, me, and the imposter Ive. If he seeks refuge at the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, there's a high probability that he won't be able to conceal it when questioned by official Beyonders utilizing their powers. This situation differs from the previous one, where the official Beyonders believed everything was under their control. They were prone to carelessness and had blind spots in their minds...

Charlie's initial elation waned as Lumian continued to scrutinize him in silence. His heart began pounding like a jazz band's drumbeat.

Fear and confusion evident in his voice, Charlie finally mustered the courage to ask, "What's the matter?"

Lumian observed that Charlie's luck remained a blend of red and black, although it had slightly improved since before.

This indicated that Susanna Mattise's threat had not been completely resolved.

He fell silent for a few seconds before speaking up, "Remember to head to Église Saint-Robert later."

Having already contacted Madame Pualis, Lumian no longer needed to stay at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman or manage Salle de Bal Brise. As long as he remained with the Savoie Mob, he still had a chance to fulfill Mr. K's mission.

Furthermore, Franca was now involved. With her vouching for him while in the Boss's good graces, Lumian could be assigned other profitable ventures even without Salle de Bal Brise. However, the earnings might not be as substantial.

"Alright, alright!" Charlie heaved a sigh of relief.

Having experienced many things, Charlie possessed an open-minded personality. He belonged to the kind of people who grew more excited as the number of individuals increased. Soon enough, his curiosity got the better of him. Pointing at the lifeless imposter Ive lying on the ground, he asked,

"Who's that? Why does he look exactly like you..."

Before Charlie could finish his question, he paused. As the fake Ive met his demise, the facial muscles relaxed, no longer resembling Ciel. The corpse appeared unfamiliar.

"That's someone who believed in an evil god and gained strange powers," Lumian explained simply, tailoring his response to Charlie's comprehension. "He has a certain connection to Susanna Mattise."

Charlie felt a lingering fear.

"No wonder he kept leading me underground..."

Unable to hold back, Lumian cursed, "You imbecile! You've been with him for so long, and yet you didn't sense anything was off

about him? Does having my face mean he's me?"
Charlie replied sheepishly, "When I entered Underground Trier, I sensed something was wrong.
"He was very quiet. He only mentioned taking me underground to completely resolve the Susanna Mattise problem. He's not like you, always cracking jokes and teasing.
"I thought it was because the situation was urgent and you weren't in the mood..."
Lumian sighed and shifted his gaze to Franca, realizing that Charlie, being an ordinary person, couldn't see through the Beyonder disguise that could fool even official Beyonders, no matter how astute he was.
The Witch had finished preparing for her own spirit-channeling spell. Standing before the fake Ive's lifeless body, she held two white candles and chanted a series of incantations in Hermes.
Due to the wall of spirituality, Lumian could only catch fragments of the chant. Franca described herself and the imposter Ive, with the former being the source of spirituality and the foundation for maintaining the ritual, and the latter being the object of prayer—the Magic Mirror that provided answers to questions.
As for Charlie, he heard even less and couldn't make sense of it all.
A faint light emerged on the makeup mirror in Franca's hand, and its interior turned into an abyss of deep darkness, as if it had sunk to the river's depths.
A hazy, pale-white face swiftly appeared in the mirror, bearing a resemblance of 50 to 60% to the deceased fake Ive.
Switching to Intis, Franca inquired, "Who are you and which organization do you belong to?"
The imposter Ive, replied in a dazed manner, "Rentas, a member of the Bliss Society."
Rentas... Lumian suddenly recalled the name.
The word "Rentas" often appeared on the posters outside Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. He was a prominent male supporting actor.
Franca pressed on with her questioning, "What kind of organization is the Bliss Society? And how is it connected to Susanna Mattise?"
The imposter Ive, Rentas, spoke with an otherworldly voice, "The Bliss Society was originally a secret society for women who love women. Susanna was one of them.
"She grew weary of being involved with members of parliament, high-ranking officials, bankers, newspaper moguls, and other men. She sought solace among fellow ladies and madams who shared her love for women. Eventually, she received divine

enlightenment and a boon, becoming a priestess of my lord. She transformed the small Bliss Society into a secret organization that worships my lord.
"In today's society, it's inconvenient for women to be openly involved in many affairs. Therefore, the Bliss Society has admitted some male members who can also receive boons, but they lack the privilege to partake in core matters or possess knowledge of the most confidential aspects."
"Remarkable!" Franca applauded.
She knew that Rentas was referring to the evil god known as the Mother Tree of Desire. Delving into such matters made her apprehensive, fearing that she might stumble upon mystical knowledge she shouldn't acquire.
A secret society for women who love women... Male members excluded from core matters... Lumian suddenly grasped something.
He stood by the wall of spirituality and gazed at the makeup mirror in Franca's hand.
"So, Hedsey frequently seeks out street girls and hunts for prey because his desires cannot be fulfilled within the Bliss Society?"
"Yes," Rentas replied. "Women love women exclusively. When I was a Sex Addict, I had to satisfy my desires on my own. Fortunately, I was more attractive than him and had female audience members who admired me. There were plenty of street girls in the market district, so I didn't need to take the risk of pursuing excitement."
"That's lit!" Franca expressed her feelings with peculiar words. She clicked her tongue and sighed. "Isn't there a regular secret group for women who love women?"
"Yes," Rentas firmly responded. "To my knowledge, there's the Moment Society and the Narcissus Society. They often organize women orgies at Trocadéro's Red House Café. We have been attempting to establish contact with them and convert them into believers of my lord[1]."
Trocadéro was situated in Quartier 16 on the north bank of the Srenzo River, in the square district. Known as the Triumph Square established by Emperor Roselle, it was a small town surrounded by a vast suburban forest. It was renowned for its exceptional wine production. Trocadéro Wine stood second only to Aurmir red wine in the world.
Fascinated, Franca listened and repeated the terms, "Trocadéro... Red House Café... Women orgies..."
Lumian couldn't help but feel more concerned about the term "Sex Addict." It seemed to perfectly suit the twisted state of Hedsey. It likely corresponded to Sequence 8 of the Mother Tree of Desire

pathway. However, he feared that time was running out for the spirit channeling, so he didn't rush to delve into the matter. Instead, he redirected his focus to Susanna Mattise.
"How did Susanna Mattise transform into an evil spirit? And why did you bring Charlie underground?"
Rentas's pale-white face contorted in distortion.
"She died while receiving a boon and transformed into an evil spirit.
"She told us that because her name was still on the lips of many Trieriens and her portrait was used by numerous men to satisfy themselves, she didn't completely dissipate. She retained a certain level of rationality, albeit warped. She became more consumed by her own affairs, neglecting all else.
"She was gravely injured by official Beyonders during her last encounter and spent time recuperating at the altar. We were worried that once she fully recovered, she would seek out Charlie and attract the attention of the authorities. So, we took advantage of the election and brought Charlie to the altar in advance, handing him over to her for handling."
Charlie had already moved to Lumian's side. His face turned ashen as he listened, feeling as if he had stepped into the depths of hell.
Franca nodded subtly and spoke, "Where is this altar? How much time until Susanna Mattise fully recovers?"
"The altar..." The surface of the makeup mirror revealed a fading blurry face, unveiling an underground tunnel.
The tunnel stretched endlessly, branching off in multiple directions before leading to a small quarry cave engulfed by vines and branches.
There, a colossal brownish-green tree stump emerged abruptly from the ground. Its form consisted of thick branches, with roots originating from an unknown place.
As the image of the tree stump grew clearer, Franca hastily interrupted the manifestation, fearing any potential disturbances.
Rentas continued, "Susanna will regain her full strength in two days and depart from the altar."

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1. Such things did exist in the real world during that era. Parisians were experts in this regard. For further details, refer to Histoire insolite des cafés parisiens. ↩

Chapter 212: Actor

Franca carefully calculated the time and inquired with meticulous detail, "What perils lie at the altar? How much progress has Susanna Mattise made in her recovery today?"

Upon hearing Franca's question, Lumian made a rough conjecture about her thoughts.

If it was possible, they could seize the opportunity to destroy the altar and eliminate Susanna Mattise, who was now weakened, once and for all!

Before departing from Salle de Bal Brise to track down the imposter Ive, Lumian had contemplated a similar issue. Since Rentas had taken Charlie underground, he believed their destination was Susanna Mattise's hiding place. Consequently, when he retrieved the carbide lamp, he also retrieved a few bundles of detonators from the safe, hoping to utilize the unique environment to blast those intruders to their demise.

Rentas's hazy, pale face took on a hint of sanctity.

"The altar is the altar. Only the light of my lord exists. There is no danger."

Lumian muttered to himself, standing by the wall of spirituality, By stating it that way, it only heightens the danger.

Rentas continued, "I do not know the exact condition of Susanna. All I know is that two weeks ago, we could not see her, but she would occasionally make sounds. Last week, she could communicate with us normally, and we could perceive her when we activated our Spirit Visions. Today, she remains the same as before, but she appears extremely feeble."

Based on Rentas's account, Lumian made a preliminary estimation. Susanna, who was originally a Fallen Tree Spirit equivalent to Sequence 5, is now nearing Sequence 6?

If Susanna had not been hiding at the Mother Tree of Desire's altar, Lumian would have considered it worth the risk.

Franca pondered for a moment and spoke, "Do you typically offer prayers at the altar and receive boons?"

"Yes," Rentas replied with a nostalgic tone. "Susanna is our priestess. She enables us to experience the Lord's love for the world and unveils everyone's true desires, allowing us to truly understand ourselves."

Upon hearing this, Franca decided to forego further inquiries and seek the truth in the details.

"Is the altar usually protected?"

"Susanna is always there," Rentas's blurred, pale face swayed gently in the mirror.

Franca gazed at the makeup mirror in her hand and queried, "Was the altar under anyone's protection during the two weeks that Susanna was severely injured?"
Rentas's spirit responded truthfully, "No."
Franca couldn't help but turn her head and glance at Lumian. She realized that he too appeared disappointed and regretful.
From Rentas's answer, they both discerned a crucial fact: the altar possessed a concealed and formidable protective mechanism!
Otherwise, regardless of its underground concealment and the difficulties in locating it, they would need to consider guarding against bounty hunters or cave adventurers fond of searching for treasure in Underground Trier. Simultaneously, they would have to be cautious of smugglers who might have temporarily altered their routes or wandering university students.
Franca let out a sigh, deciding that it would be best to leave the altar and Susanna Mattise in the hands of the authorities.
The evil spirit still needed two more days to recover, and she and Lumian had already discovered the whereabouts of the altar. They had ample time!
Franca shifted her focus and inquired about something else.
"How many members are there in the Bliss Society at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?"
"Not many," Rentas's blurry face with flickering dark green eyes responded. "But I only know a few. Ive, Hedsey, and I report to Maipú Meyer. He is the theater manager and represents Susanna in the core affairs of the Bliss Society since she became an evil spirit."
"Why choose a man? Isn't it believed that women only love women? It would be easier to communicate with the other core members of the Bliss Society if it were a woman," Franca objected.
Are you certain there's no hidden significance in this conversation? Lumian sensed Madame Hidden Blade's curiosity piqued.
Rentas's voice drifted as he replied, "Maipú Meyer used to be Susanna's lover."
Franca clicked her tongue and sighed.
"So, we have the high priestess going against the principles of the organization, loving both men and women."
As she spoke, she cast a glance at Charlie, who appeared bewildered and terrified.
Rentas didn't shy away from revealing the truth about Maipú Meyer.
"Before Susanna joined the Bliss Society, they were lovers. Furthermore, he was the only one who could make Susanna feel at

ease and relaxed. After her divine awakening and embracing her faith in my lord, she transformed the Bliss Society and recruited Maipú Meyer. However, their intimate relationship ceased. When she became an evil spirit, she no longer limited her affections to women and resumed her connection with Maipú Meyer. Meanwhile, she sought out other targets, infiltrating their dreams and draining their energy. She would fall in love with them before killing them."

Charlie's face grew paler with each passing word, as if he had fallen into an inescapable nightmare that would only end in death.

Franca, who had seriously contemplated having her lover Gardner bear her child, commented, "This is all rather twisted."

She then smiled and remarked, "Does Maipú Meyer enjoy wearing green hats?"

"No, he now exclusively wears a black top hat. He even meticulously grooms the tips of his beard," Rentas dismissed Franca's speculation.

Lumian recalled the mention of a woman's death in Aunett Town during Mr. K's Gathering.

If Maipú Meyer receives a boon and becomes a male Fallen Tree Spirit, could he enter women's dreams and induce erotic fantasies to drain their energy, gradually weakening them until they perish? The Bliss Society consists of women as its core members, emphasizing that they only love women. It is unlikely for male members to attain such high levels of power. Those incidents are not a result of the Bliss Society, but they too believe in the Mother Tree of Desire? Or could it be due to women loving women?

Franca pressed on with her questioning.

"Why don't you even know the number of members in the Bliss Society at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? So, other than Susanna, there are no female members among the Bliss Society members you're familiar with?"

Rentas's pale, blurry face seemed to contort.

"Only Maipú Meyer interacts with the female members."

"While I'm uncertain about the current status of female members at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, I can speculate on who they were in the past."

"How?" Franca inquired curiously.

Rentas replied, "Those who joined our theater started as supporting actresses. Through honing their acting skills, they eventually became the leading ladies before they left. They were the core members of the Bliss Society.

"The theater was established as a safe and dependable venue for

them to fulfill their inner desires until they could gain initial control."
"Why must they act?" Lumian recalled Rentas's various performances.
Rentas struggled for a moment before explaining, "We were blessed with a boon equivalent to a Sequence 7 called Actor.
"This gift enables us to evoke a deep yearning for attention and a desire to perform in our targets. It also awakens our own hidden desire to showcase ourselves and perform. Before we fully master the power of this boon, we cannot restrain this impulse. Therefore, we require a proper stage to satiate our desires without arousing suspicion.
"Every applause from the audience is a validation for us."
A peculiar Sequence... Instead of immediately attacking Rentas, I confronted him. I failed to utilize the ritual silver dagger in time to suppress my explosive desires because unknowingly, my own desire to perform was awakened... Lumian came to a realization.
Franca clapped her hands, exclaiming, "That explains it. No wonder I was so immersed in acting today!"
She smiled and inquired, "Does your ability to disguise as Ive and Ciel also come from Actor?"
Rentas's face nodded slightly.
"We can manipulate our muscles, skin, and bones to a certain extent. We possess all the necessary skills for disguise, including makeup techniques and prop production. Moreover, Actors have the talent for 'imitation.' They can convincingly portray anything. If they act as an ordinary person, their Astral Projection will appear ordinary as well. If they portray a soldier, they'll display remarkable combat and marksmanship."
"What if they act as a woman?"
"What about acting as a Beyonder?"
Franca and Lumian raised their questions.
Finally, the two of them understood how the fake Ive could deceive official Beyonders and why the theater performers at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons excelled in their craft.
Working with real Actors every day, it was no wonder their acting skills were top-notch.
Rentas's spirit spoke in a dazed manner, "To portray a woman, you need to prepare props in advance, such as fake breasts and long hair.
"When acting as other Beyonders, if I have observed them beforehand, I can replicate their corresponding abilities, but they won't have tangible effects. They are more like illusions. However, if I were given the opportunity to closely observe and learn from a

Beyonder over several months, I could perform similar but significantly weakened abilities."
Impressive indeed... Lumian sighed, then asked in a deep voice, "Who were you impersonating when you emanated that powerful aura?"
"None other than Susanna, as she connects with the altar's aura while conducting the boon ritual." Rentas revealed a trace of piety and reverence.
Franca and Lumian exchanged glances, grateful that they had abandoned the idea of heading to the altar to eliminate future troubles.
Based on Rentas's response, it appeared that when Susanna merged with the altar, she could exhibit power at a demigod level!
"Do Actors possess any other abilities?" Franca inquired.
Rentas shook his head. "No. However, Maipú Meyer once cautioned me against becoming too engrossed in my roles while acting."
Lumian seized the opportunity to ask, "What are the names of the other Sequences corresponding to Actor?"
Rentas's voice took on a sinister tone. "Sequence 9 Scrooge, Sequence 8 Sex Addict, Sequence 6 Recipient, and Sequence 5 Baby Cupid. Beyond that, I am unaware."
Quite fitting... Lumian, who was acquainted with the abilities of Scrooge and Sex Addict, questioned further, "What does 'Recipient' entail?"
"It involves craving success and recognition from high society or the public," Rentas explained.
Curiosity piqued, Franca asked, "It seems that you Actors aren't able to fully control your corresponding desires at every Sequence. At Sequence 5, won't your desires explode upon encountering anything?"
"In truth, as they progress through the Sequences, individuals can gradually gain control over their corresponding desires," Rentas clarified. "For Actors, their primary desire is acting. Their desires for wealth and the opposite sex are only slightly stronger than usual. They won't appear pathological or completely uncontrollable as a result."
Lumian found himself perplexed.
"Then why were you so miserly when you portrayed Monsieur Ive?"
He chose to pick up a gold coin of unknown origin.
Rentas responded naturally, "Because the real Ive is like that. I must stay true to the role."

Chapter 213: Correct Interpretation

Upon hearing Rentas's response, Lumian found himself torn between laughter and rejoicing, grateful that he had achieved a satisfactory outcome through a mistaken train of thought.

Originally, Lumian believed that Beyonders, like the imposter Ive, who worshiped the Mother Tree of Desire, would struggle to control their insatiable hunger and carnal desires. That's why he decided to use a gold coin to carry the vagrant's bad luck. To his surprise, the followers of the evil god were primarily influenced by their specific desires at different stages. Once they mastered the power or received a new boon, they could break free and progress to the next state. While their desires remained potent, they were no longer uncontrollable.

In simpler terms, if Rentas hadn't been portraying Monsieur Ive and didn't feel the need to exhibit stinginess, there was a high probability that he wouldn't have picked up the ill-fated gold coin and would have approached the situation with greater caution.

Of course, if Rentas hadn't been attuned to changes in fate and failed to detect the issue with the gold coin, he would likely have claimed it for himself once he realized its owner was long gone and wouldn't return. After all, he possessed a touch more greed than the average person, and as the saying goes, "finders keepers" in the hearts of a certain percentage of ordinary individuals.

Lumian now grasped the full meaning behind Rentas's words.

Indeed, one mustn't become lost in the role when acting.

However, Rentas was in the midst of acting, so scrutinizing the details was not a concern for him. Otherwise, it would have been easy for others to discover his true identity as the impostor Ive...

Franca sensed that the spirit channeling was coming to an end and hurriedly asked, "Who are the suspected core members of the Bliss Society?"

Rentas's pale, indistinct face twitched.

"Even if I were to tell you, you wouldn't find them.

"They joined Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons after receiving boons and becoming actresses. They adopted false names and concealed their true faces. Once their acting skills reached maturity and they gained control over their corresponding desires, they would reclaim their real identities upon leaving the theater.

"If you wish to uncover their assumed identities, gather a list of all the female leads in Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons' plays from the past two years. Look for those who performed most frequently."

At the mention of the female lead at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à

Pigeons, Lumian's mind recalled a name.
"Could Charlotte Calvino be one of the core members of the Bliss Society?"
She played the lead in the play Forest Fairy. The costumes in the promotional stills evoked memories of Susanna Mattise.
Rentas's face grew increasingly elusive, and his voice became more ethereal.
"I don't know. She rose through the ranks as an apprentice actress and only recently started taking the lead roles in the past few months. She's not an outsider, but Maipú Meyer might promote her to a member of the Bliss Society."
Franca was about to inquire about Maipú Meyer's corresponding stages and abilities when Rentas's spirit, consumed by black flames, could no longer hold on and dissipated upon the surface of the makeup mirror.
With a tinge of regret, Franca concluded the ritual and dismissed the wall of spirituality.
As she squatted beside Rentas's lifeless body, rummaging through his pockets, she let out a sigh and remarked, "I didn't manage to get to Maipú Meyer. Forget it, I'll leave it to the authorities to handle it."
Lumian paused, pondering her question.
"I've heard from a playwright that Maipú Meyer is highly ambitious. He aims to make Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons the most renowned theater in Trier and receive the prestigious Intis Legion of Honor medal."
"Desire for success and recognition?" Franca recalled Rentas's depiction of a Sequence 6 recipient. "I suppose that's the limit for male members of the Bliss Society?"
"Likely so," Lumian struggled to provide a precise answer.
Franca had already collected a stack of items.
Two metal canisters, a leather wallet, a peculiar dough that conformed to facial contours, thin skin-like pieces, eyebrow pencils, and various makeup tools...
"Give it a sniff." Franca tossed the two metal canisters to Lumian.
Lumian distinguished them for a moment before responding, "One canister contains the scent you just experienced, and the other should hold a matching sedative."
They appeared to be essential items for followers of the Mother Tree of Desire when venturing outside.
"Mysticism-branded smelling salts?" Franca mused, then added, "You can keep what's left of the canister you have. This is mine. I'll give you the sedative. Choose from these disguises and take the money from the wallet. Anything you don't want, I'll keep. Bloody

hell, this pauper doesn't even possess materials, talismans, or weapons, let alone Beyonder characteristics or mystical items!"
"The sedative and mysticism smelling salts will prove useful," Lumian, who had only obtained Beyonder abilities from "Hammer" Ait, didn't show much concern.
Franca didn't overlook any part of Rentas's body—including his crotch and soles—yet she found nothing more.
She withdrew a folded cloth bag and opened it, carefully stashing away the collection from the ground. Then, she addressed Lumian, "We'll divide this once we return."
With that, she rose to her feet and glanced at the frightened Charlie. She muttered to herself thoughtfully, "He witnessed our clash with Rentas. What should we do?"
Charlie's legs trembled, and as he leaned toward Lumian, he gritted his teeth and proclaimed, "I-I won't betray you!"
Without waiting for Lumian's response, Franca let out a sigh and declared, "Forget it. We'll leave it to the official Beyonders."
She deliberately introduced the topic before promptly reaching a conclusion. Lumian, finally freed from the grip of his acting impulses, regained his composure and rationality. After careful consideration, he suggested,
"I have alternative solutions.
"Charlie doesn't need to seek refuge at Église Saint-Robert, nor does he need to worry about Susanna Mattise finding him."
He thought of his Luck Transference Spell!
Before, he refrained from using it as Susanna Mattise had yet to bother Charlie. There was no corresponding fate to alter. But now, Susanna Mattise was on the path to recovery, and Charlie was her primary target. His luck had taken a turn, and a life-threatening calamity loomed. His luck had indeed changed!
When the moment arrived, Lumian would "gift" the gold coin carrying the weight of the impending disaster to the real Ive, allowing them to face it on their own.
Naturally, this differed from the Substitution Spell and Fallen Mercury's Fate Exchange. It only diverted bloodshed temporarily. In other words, Charlie wouldn't be in Susanna Mattise's crosshairs for the next few days. However, in a few days' time, unless Susanna Mattise was wholly purified or had lost her memories, this external threat would still remain.
Nevertheless, the authorities would take action tomorrow, armed with sufficient intel!
When Lumian realized that Charlie's luck was in jeopardy, he refrained from intervening because he could only change Charlie's luck, not his own. Susanna would undoubtedly target him as well,

the adversary who had provoked Charlie's betrayal. Therefore, he opted for the simplest approach—to disguise himself and urge Charlie to seek refuge at the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, thus buying more time to guard against Susanna Mattise. They were now certain that Susanna had two days left to recuperate.
"Really?" Charlie's eyes brightened.
Lumian smiled and inquired, "Do you trust me or not?"
Charlie stammered, "I-I believe you! I believe you!
"You just like to tease people about trivial matters."
Curiosity piqued, Franca asked, "What way?"
A method you shouldn't be aware of... Lumian silently muttered, contemplating the specifics.
If I wish to alter Charlie's current luck, mere prayers won't suffice. I must harness the power sealed within me...
Poor Charlie; I'll have to render him unconscious. I can't expose the corruption within me or the suspicion of seeking aid from an evil god...
Just as Lumian was about to instruct Charlie to accompany him and prepare for his temporary incapacitation, a thought flashed across his mind.
Does utilizing the power within the seal constitute exploiting Termiboros?
Should I write to Madam Magician and seek her opinion?
Previously, the tramp's ill fortune bore no relation to mysticism or Beyonder abilities. The ritual required minimal power. However, the support needed to resist a Sequence 5 evil spirit atop an evil god's altar would likely be several times greater than before...
What would occur then?
Since Charlie's luck changed, everything had become urgent. The timing was impeccable. It seemed as though an opportunity had emerged without allowing me a chance to weigh my options...
If I hadn't just corresponded with Madam Magician and received her reminder, I might have already altered Charlie's luck...
Noticing Lumian's motionless state, Franca inquired, "What's the matter?"
Shaking off his stupor, Lumian contemplated for a moment.
"I just realized that the method I had prepared seems to have significant flaws."
"Ah," Charlie uttered, a mixture of disappointment and concern.
Franca ruminated for a few seconds before suggesting, "I have an idea as well.
"Charlie won't head to Église Saint-Robert. He'll follow us to Rue des Blouses Blanches.
"As long as we survive the night, we'll be fine by tomorrow.

"Think about it. Our original plan was to confront Susanna Mattise, and she still has two days remaining at the altar. Even if we face an attack tonight, it will likely come from Maipú Meyer and his lackeys. Even if he recruits other core members of the Bliss Society, as long as they are inferior to Susanna Mattise at the altar, we stand a good chance of holding out until dawn. If things don't go as planned, we can create a commotion and attract the attention of official Beyonders. We can escape from the market district amidst the chaos.

"This is the worst-case scenario. However, if Charlie goes to Église Saint-Robert, we must consider moving immediately. We could also become targets."

Lumian pondered for a few moments and found the idea quite feasible.

He nodded and stated, "I have no objections."

His gaze then fell upon Charlie, who eagerly replied, "I don't have any issues either."

Charlie held considerable confidence in Ciel and Franca.

Lumian refocused his attention and observed Charlie's luck.

To his surprise, Charlie's impending disaster had noticeably weakened and showed signs of improvement!

What... Charlie's true misfortune lies in participating in the luck transference ritual? Did his fate change when I abandoned that notion? Although a bloody calamity still awaits, it appears less severe... Bloody Termiboros! Lumian comprehended the situation in an instant and couldn't help but inwardly curse.

Chapter 214: Encounter

After cursing Termiboros, Lumian caught sight of Franca securing the cloth bag with war spoils and fastening it to her person.

A thought struck him, triggering a recollection of one of Scrooge's abilities, and he reminded her, "Aren't you worried those Scrooges will track us down using lost possessions?"

He had previously informed Franca about the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, mentioning that the sinister cult possessed a peculiar knack for detecting the whereabouts of their lost belongings.

In contrast to the perverted Hedsey, Rentas carried out his orders dutifully. If anything happened to him, he might possess something from Maipú Meyer to determine his location and the saboteur's whereabouts.

Franca scoffed dismissively. "That ability surely has its limitations in terms of time and range. By the time the folks at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons realize Rentas is missing, it will prove exceedingly arduous for them to track us down.

"Besides, with Charlie here, they could find us if they truly desired. Whether we take these items or not, Charlie is akin to Susanna Mattise's lost possession—no, her lost lover."

Charlie stood dazed, bewildered by the conversation between Ciel and "Red Boots." It wasn't until Franca mentioned his name that he grasped his "situation" somewhat. Sporting a bitter expression, he retorted, "We're not lovers..."

Franca consoled Charlie, though her sincerity remained questionable. "Can't be helped. She's convinced of it on her own accord, and she's strong enough."

Persuaded by Franca's argument, Lumian ceased dwelling on Scrooge's abilities. He pulled out the ritual silver dagger and promptly tended to his wound.

Bending down, he scooped up Rentas's lifeless body and carried it to the debris-blocked hole, shoving it into the passage the Actor had previously dug.

Charlie watched in horror, marveling at Ciel's skills as a ruthless mob leader who had struck fear into the Poison Spur Mob. His attention then shifted to Rentas's attire—shirt, vest, pants, and boots.

They seem relatively new. If they are stripped and pawned, I reckon they can fetch at least two verl d'or... Charlie's mouth gapped, but he refrained from voicing his thoughts.

Franca nodded approvingly. "Good job. Cleaning up the scene and stalling the enemy's detection."

"I worry that Maipú Meyer will exercise caution. Once Rentas fails to return by midnight, he'll lead his men here and stumble upon the corpse. Then, he might choose to abandon Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and relocate with the remaining members of the Bliss Society. Maybe we don't even have to wait until midnight. Susanna Mattise will undoubtedly prod him if she can find a way to contact him."

Such a turn of events would thwart the forthcoming official Beyonders' raid and leave behind latent dangers.

Franca added, "Fortunately, Susanna won't be able to leave the altar in the next two days, and the altar itself can't sprout legs and flee. At the very least, the official Beyonders can address Charlie's predicament."

"Not necessarily," Lumian countered, "we shouldn't make assumptions about the evil god altar using conventional logic. It's akin to me never fathoming that a man could give birth."

"Huh?" Charlie's confusion escalated as he listened to Ciel and "Red Boots," comprehending each word independently but failing to grasp their interconnected meaning.

Franca fell silent for two seconds before solemnly nodding.

"You're right. The true form of the altar is like a massive tree stump. It might possess life. When the time comes, it can uproot itself and transform into a treant, making its escape with Susanna."

With a clap of her hands, Franca exclaimed, "Exactly! How can it be called a tree spirit without a tree?"

Lumian sensed that Franca's conjecture could be close to the truth. He recollected wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses at Auberge du Coq Doré, where he had witnessed an extensive underground network of brownish-green roots stretching in all directions.

Susanna Mattise's tree stump altar might be part of that brownish-green root system. When faced with danger, it can retract... Lumian's thoughts raced as he crawled into the passageway and pushed Rentas's lifeless body into the rubble-blocked hole.

Emerging from the hole, he retrieved the carbide lamp and the enemy's lantern. He scrutinized the structure of the tunnel's ceiling and the surrounding rock walls. Every now and then, he extended his palm, gently patted and knocked against them.

Confused by Lumian's actions, Franca, eager to leave Underground Trier as soon as possible, asked, "What are you doing?"

Calmly, Lumian replied, "I'm searching for a suitable spot to place a bundle of explosives and bury the corpse completely. We mustn't make too much noise to avoid alerting Susanna, who's deep

underground, and Maipú Meyer, who's in Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons on the surface."
Simultaneously, he had to ensure that the ground wouldn't collapse, as it could endanger the buildings above.
Clearly, the municipal workers had diligently reinforced these areas when connecting the underground quarries, sewers, and various tunnels. Regular repairs were carried out, and minor cave-ins posed no threat to the surface's safety or its own integrity.
Using his Hunter powers, Lumian soon identified a depression on the side of the hole and placed a bundle of detonators there.
"Unfortunately, we lack the proper tools and materials. Otherwise, we could set up a trigger for the explosives under the corpse. When Maipú Meyer arrives and tries to lift the body in his agitation, it would go boom," Lumian said with regret, squatting down.
Since consuming the first potion, he hadn't had the opportunity to execute a Hunter's bomb trap and showcase his explosive finesse.
Charlie's heart raced as he listened, confirming Ciel's reputation as the most renowned mob leader of recent times.
"Indeed, a true Hunter," Franca exclaimed, filled with admiration.
Lumian then took out a match, igniting the fuse.
He stood up and began walking toward Franca and Charlie at a steady pace. Passing by the pile of gravel, he tossed the lantern into the tunnel.
"Hey, hey, hey!" Charlie hurriedly warned Lumian as he noticed the fuse nearing its end.
His calf muscles tensed, preparing to leap behind the rock wall to avoid the impending explosion.
Dressed in a simple formal top and cargo pants, Lumian had only covered a distance of seven to eight meters when the detonator erupted behind him.
The tunnel trembled slightly, and the stone wall beside the hole collapsed, burying most of the already unstable opening.
Flames ignited, and gravel scattered, but they didn't reach Lumian's back. They only affected the area two to three meters away from him and in a different direction within the tunnel.
Lumian didn't turn around or evade. He approached Franca, who wore a smile, and Charlie, who stood there dumbfounded.
Franca gave him a thumbs-up and clicked her tongue. "Let's go."
With that, she swiftly turned and headed towards the exit of Underground Trier, the same path they had used to enter.
Black flames silently flickered behind her, igniting the blood on the ground, filling the air with its scent, and engulfing the remnants of red and white.
Charlie's eyes widened, as if he had stepped into a surreal dream.

Only when Lumian patted him on the shoulder did he turn and follow, as if his spirit had abandoned him.
As they ascended towards the surface, Franca grinned and said, "Tomorrow and the day after, we'll discover whether Susanna Mattise and the altar have been completely eradicated, by observing Charlie's situation."
"Whether Susanna Mattise comes searching for him?" Lumian, carrying the carbide lamp, startled Charlie intentionally.
If that were the case, Franca would have said "two days later" instead of "tomorrow or the day after."
Charlie trembled and stammered, "H-h-how?"
Franca chuckled before replying, "If the official Beyonders don't come looking for you, it means you have truly escaped the nightmare called Susanna.
"If they do come and offer you a good position, congratulations. You will have hope entwined with danger."
"W-what do you mean?" Charlie didn't fully grasp the meaning.
Franca didn't explain further and instead inquired, "If you become a quarry policeman with a monthly salary of 300 verl d'or, you'll face conflicts with smugglers, cave explorers, and bounty hunters every day. There's a certain chance of sacrifice. Are you willing?"
"Of course!" Charlie blurted out.
Though being a quarry policeman was perilous, most of them managed to survive!
If Susanna Mattise isn't completely purged, the official Beyonders would offer Charlie a job that would make it easier to protect him. And those positions often come with good pay. Lumian roughly understood Franca's meaning.
The three of them exited Underground Trier, maneuvered through an alley, and crossed a barricade. Taking a secluded route on Rue des Blouses Blanches, they arrived at Franca's sixth-floor apartment.
Franca removed her hood and casually tossed the bag containing their spoils of war beside the coffee table. She half-reclined on the armchair and gestured with a nod towards the sofa and another armchair.
"Now, we must endure until dawn."
After Lumian and Charlie took their seats, the living room fell into an eerie silence.
This made Charlie uneasy. He glanced at Ciel and spoke up, "You actually possess those mystical abilities."
"If not, how could I have slain Margot and Ait, becoming the guardian of Salle de Bal Brise and Auberge du Coq Doré?" Lumian chuckled.

"That's true." Charlie pondered for a moment and found this explanation more acceptable.
As the trio engaged in conversation, the needle of the cuckoo wall clock gradually approached midnight.
Outside the window, the darkness remained undisturbed.
At that moment, faint footsteps resonated from outside the door, approaching swiftly from below.
"Jenna... I forgot she was coming over tonight!" Franca exclaimed, sitting upright.
She glanced at Lumian, then at Charlie. After a brief moment of hesitation, she closed her eyes and waited for Jenna to open the door herself.
With a click, Jenna, dressed in a white blouse and a fluffy beige skirt, used the spare key to enter the apartment.
In an instant, she noticed Lumian and Charlie.
"What's going on?" Jenna couldn't hide her confusion, her gaze shifting between Lumian, Charlie, and Franca.
Franca mustered a forced smile and said, "We were getting bored. We thought of playing Fighting Evil. Want to join us? We have two decks of cards."
Jenna peered suspiciously for a few seconds, sensing that Franca didn't want to disclose the real reason in front of Ciel. She gestured towards the guest room and stated,
"Dammit, it's already late. Why are you still playing cards? I have a packed day tomorrow. I need to get some sleep!"
She waved at Lumian and Charlie before heading towards the guest room.
Lumian gazed at Franca calmly and inquired, "Why didn't you just tell her what we're doing?"
Jenna, too, had fallen victim to the predicament at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. She had nearly been raped by the pervert named Hedsey.
Franca was caught off guard.
"You're right. Why didn't I just say it straightforwardly..."
There was no need to conceal it!
She glanced at the closed door of the guest room, intending to reveal the truth to Jenna later.
Casually, Lumian asked, "What does Jenna usually keep busy with?"
"Don't you know?" Franca's face gradually lit up with satisfaction. "She's an apprentice in acting, studying drama. Sigh, it's not like the old days. I heard in the previous era, apprentices could learn for free as long as they signed a long-term contract. They even received food and accommodation. Nowadays, not only do they

have to pay tuition fees, but they also have to cover all expenses themselves."
As Franca spoke, she noticed Lumian's expression turning grave.
Lumian furrowed his brow and inquired, "At which theater is she doing her apprenticeship?"
"I never asked..." Franca murmured, making the connection.
In that instant, Jenna emerged from the guest room, carrying a stack of items as she made her way towards the restroom.
"What theater are you apprenticing at?" Franca stood up and inquired.
Jenna responded with confusion, "Why do you ask? You've never been curious before."
Observing Lumian and Charlie's focused gaze, she couldn't help but curse, "Why the f*ck are you staring at me? Dogsh*t, what does my theater have to do with you?"
Realizing Franca and Lumian's seriousness, she hesitated for a moment before muttering, "Dammit, there's no need for me to hide anything! It's the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."

Chapter 215: Jenna´s Worry

As soon as Jenna revealed where she studied acting, a hush fell over the living room. Franca and Lumian exchanged inexplicable glances, causing Jenna to feel a pang of uncertainty. Charlie, the waiter, couldn't conceal his startled expression and the fear that gripped him was evident in his shrinking demeanor and fearful eyes.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?" Jenna asked, her confidence wavering.

Lumian seized the moment and tossed a Louis d'or at Jenna's feet, his eyes intently following her every move, even the slightest flicker in her gaze.

"Dammit! What's the meaning of this?" Jenna looked down at the Louis d'or, her confusion turning into anger as she confronted Lumian.

Lumian's expression returned to normal, and he turned his head, grinning at Franca. "Not a Scrooge."

"Of course!" Franca responded, a mix of exasperation and amusement. "We meet often. She may be a bit frugal, but she's definitely not a Scrooge. Plus, she doesn't exhibit any signs of being a Sex Addict, and her acting skills leave much to be desired."

Franca couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret.

"What are you two talking about?" Jenna was utterly bewildered, forgetting her own penchant for profanity.

"You explain," Lumian instructed Franca.

Franca rose and tried to allow Jenna to squeeze into the recliner with her, but realizing it was too cramped, Jenna opted for an armchair instead, resting a pile of ordinary clothes on her lap.

"Do you remember that creep Hedsey?" Franca slumped back disappointedly in the recliner.

Jenna responded without hesitation, "I remember. Damn it, he died too easily!"

It wasn't exactly an easy demise... Lumian silently muttered, recalling the gruesome state of Hedsey's lower body.

Using this as a starting point, Franca delved into the secrets of the Bliss Society, the dark Sequences tied to the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, the connection between the Bliss Society and the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, and various details involving the true Ive, Rentas, Maipú Meyer, and Susanna Mattise.

Jenna, having absorbed Franca's mystical knowledge, grew increasingly astonished with each revelation. It was as if a door had swung open, revealing a new world—a scene that was entirely different from what she had known before. It festered, exuded

sinister vibes, terrified her, and made her stomach churn with disgust.
After Franca finished her account, she blurted out, "Did that creep target me at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?"
Considering that Hedsey was a subordinate of theater manager Maipú Meyer and associated with the Bliss Society, he likely frequented and surreptitiously entered the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Jenna suspected that the pervert often lurked in the shadows, observing the apprentice actresses during their classes.
"It's possible," Franca agreed, contemplating why the pervert Hedsey didn't choose another underground singer but instead risked attacking Jenna.
Jenna was undeniably attractive. After her time at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, where she honed her acting and makeup skills, her allure had gradually emerged. However, she wasn't a fully-fledged Witch yet, nor was she overwhelmingly captivating. In the bustling marketplace, there was no shortage of underground singers who were more alluring and could ignite the desires of men of lower standing. Besides, they lacked the distinction of being Red Boots's mistress.
Jenna glared at Lumian, her teeth grinding together in frustration.
"So, you suspected that I believed in the Mother Tree of Desire, and you used a Louis d'or to test me? Isn't that being a bit stingy? You should have used at least ten Louis d'or!"
Lumian chuckled softly. "I suddenly realized that since we met, you've never praised any orthodox god. I still don't know if you're a follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun or the God of Steam and Machinery. It's rather suspicious."
Jenna scoffed and replied, "Most of the time when I meet you, I'm dressed like this. I wear smoky makeup that symbolizes debauchery and sing, 'My dear, he's really good with his fingers.' If I were to praise the Sun in this state, I believe God would incinerate me."
As she spoke, she pointed to her chest, revealing a generous amount of alluring cleavage.
Without waiting for Lumian's response, she turned her finger towards Franca.
"And Franca never praises any deity either. Why aren't you suspecting her?"
"Who says I don't?" Franca declared solemnly, drawing a triangular Sacred Emblem on her chest. "By Steam!"
Your acting skills are mediocre... Aurore is the same. She rarely mentions her faith and doesn't attend Mass. She only praises the

Sun when questioned... Lumian drew the triangular Sacred Emblem.
"By Steam!"
Caught up in their actions, Charlie instinctively spread his arms wide.
"Praise the Sun!"
An indescribable silence descended, as if no one knew how to proceed with the conversation.
After a few seconds, Lumian addressed Jenna, saying, "So, your true identity is an apprentice actress."
Jenna couldn't help but feel a twinge of satisfaction. She lifted her chin slightly and replied, "Well then, am I qualified to critique your acting skills? And let me clarify, I'm not some low-class hooligan with a vulgar mouth. I'm merely playing the role of an underground songstress. How did I do? Was it convincingly authentic? Can you find any faults?"
"No wonder I occasionally find you rather refined," Lumian mocked, concurring with Jenna's statement.
"What do you mean, 'rather'?" Jenna expressed her dissatisfaction.
Charlie's gaze darted between their faces, eventually landing on Franca, who sat in the recliner.
Franca pursed her lips and observed Lumian and Jenna as they bickered.
Lumian dismissed Jenna's bragging and said, "Let's discuss the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."
After a few moments of contemplation, Jenna blurted out in frustration, "Dammit! My tuition fees!"
As soon as the words left her mouth, she noticed everyone giving her strange looks.
Jenna hurriedly clarified, "Didn't you mention that Maipú Meyer might escape with the members of the Bliss Society? Won't Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons shut down? Damn it, I've already paid a year's worth of tuition fees to these damn heretics! I need to get that money back!"
Once Jenna regained her composure, Lumian's lips twitched.
"Weren't you claiming that your foul mouth and low morals were all part of an act?"
"..." At first, Jenna was left speechless, but then she defended herself forcefully. "I am currently Jenna, the underground songstress! I am still in character and haven't broken free from it..."
Observing Lumian's skeptical expression, Jenna became enraged with embarrassment.
"Dammit, don't you understand? This is called method acting!"

"Yes, yes, yes," Franca chimed in, trying her best to change the subject. "Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons has a dedicated audience and talented actors. Even if the theater manager and a few leads leave, it won't shut down. At most, they might embezzle funds. It'll be a bit challenging for them. I believe there will be plenty of people willing to take over such valuable assets. Oh, by the way, who owns Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?"
Jenna recollected and replied, "Maipú Meyer himself."
"Ah, I see..." Lumian glanced at Franca. "If Maipú Meyer truly intends to escape, we could acquire Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons at a low price. There are numerous dancers and singers under Brignais's control who don't want to sell themselves. We can give them an opportunity to earn a living at the theater."
"They will face fierce competition." Franca contemplated. "If we succeed, it could indeed be a viable path. The challenge lies in convincing Brignais... Haha, we can spin him a tale and sell him a promise. Let him know that no matter how much he squeezes a singer who moonlights as a street girl, he can only make a pittance. On the other hand, a renowned theater actress under the influence of our Savoie Mob will bring far greater returns."
Charlie's gaze shifted between Lumian and Franca before settling on Jenna, who sat in an armchair.
After discussing with Lumian, Franca assured Jenna, "Don't worry, your tuition fees won't be in vain."
Jenna, who had been listening intently to their conversation, let out a sigh of relief and muttered,
"The tuition fees for Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons aren't cheap at all."
Franca redirected the conversation back to its original course.
"What's your impression of the people from Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? Who do you find suspicious?"
Jenna contemplated for a moment before responding, "Maipú Meyer enjoys watching our acting classes. His gaze can be a bit lecherous, but he has never harassed anyone. That's something many men do, isn't it? Yes, some apprentices might have a private relationship with him. After all, he's the theater's owner and manager.
"Rentas possesses remarkable acting skills. He is the most professional and exceptional among all the acting instructors. The characters he portrays in plays seem to come alive, each one distinct from the others..."
At this point, Jenna's tone revealed a touch of envy, as if she desired to possess the abilities of an Actor. However, thoughts of Hedsey's perversity and Susanna Mattise's current predicament

filled her with fear, preventing her from indulging in such fantasies.
"I haven't really interacted with the Ive you mentioned. Perhaps he only appears in certain genres...
"I'm not well-acquainted with Charlotte. By the time I joined Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, she had already taken on lead roles, but she was my role model. Her acting skills are slightly inferior to Rentas's. I'm uncertain if she's an Actor. Dammit, it's hard to say..."
Jenna struggled to restrain herself for a long while before finally cursing.
"The other acting instructors are probably not Actors. Their acting abilities pale in comparison to Rentas's. They often praise me for my talent in acting. While I may not match Rentas or the previous female leads of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, I can hold my own against Charlotte when she was still an apprentice..."
Jenna suddenly fell silent.
"What's the matter?" Franca inquired, concerned.
Charlie's gaze shifted from Franca and Jenna to Ciel, who sat beside him.
Jenna furrowed her brow and said, "Tomorrow, the official Beyonders will conduct a thorough investigation of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. What... what should I do?"
She was a wild Beyonder, an Assassin.
"Abandon Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and find another theater?" Lumian suggested.
Money was the least of her concerns.
Jenna pressed her lips together, her expression filled with dejection.
"B-but I used my true identity at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. What about my mother and brother..."

Chapter 216: Acting Guidance

Lumian wasn't sure if Jenna's bounty would have consequences for her family, so he turned to Franca, hoping she could use her connections to persuade the official Beyonders to overlook a mere apprentice actress.

Franca didn't hide her dilemma.

Helping to hide something was not an issue for someone like 007, but if they expected him to meticulously cover for someone during the operation, two conditions had to be met. First, he had to be involved in the operation and responsible for investigating the apprentice actresses. Second, he needed some information about Jenna to determine whom he should assist.

Franca didn't believe that 007 happened to be in the market district by chance. At best, he could pass on information. The chances of him being directly in charge of the operations were highly unlikely.

"I can try, but I can't make any promises," Franca replied, looking at Jenna with concern, trying to offer some comfort without making any definite commitments.

Jenna acknowledged her words briefly, feeling a bit relieved, but she still struggled to come up with another solution.

Lumian pondered for a moment and said teasingly, "You're just an apprentice actress. Why are you so anxious?

"Even if the official Beyonders investigate everyone in Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, they won't waste much effort on you. Think about it. You've only been in the market district for a short time, and you haven't even become an apprentice actress yet. You don't even have a chance to play a minor supporting role. How could you be a female member of the Bliss Society?"

"That's right," Franca interjected. "You spend most of your time singing in bars and dance halls rather than interacting with the cult of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. You're in the least suspicious group. If you tell the investigators the truth, you might not have to undergo any further tests of your Beyonder powers."

Lumian added with a smile, "And even if they do test you, it will mainly be to determine if you believe in the Mother Tree of Desire, or if you're a Scrooge or a Sex Addict. And you definitely don't fall into any of those categories.

"This is a blind spot for the official Beyonders during their investigations, and you can take advantage of it.

"Didn't you mention your excellent acting skills? Now is the time to showcase them!"

"Yes... When the Sun rises, go to Église Saint-Robert and pray. Get

an accessory that reveals your identity as a believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun, and wear it. When you enter Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, whether or not the official Beyonders arrive, praise the Sun frequently."
"Evil god believers rarely engage in such actions. It will effectively set you apart from them. If the official Beyonders notice these details, there's a good chance they'll consider you trustworthy."
Jenna's eyes sparkled as she listened.
"That's right.
"A devout apprentice actress who believes in the Eternal Blazing Sun and has only recently joined Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons won't switch to an evil god so easily. They only need to conduct a simple investigation..."
"As long as I lead them to search for Beyonder powers in connection with the believers of the evil god, they probably won't suspect that I became a Beyonder due to other encounters..."
The more Jenna spoke, the more her excitement grew. She placed the stack of clothes on her lap and stood up.
She paced back and forth, making gestures as if she were embodying a devoted apprentice actress who believed in the Eternal Blazing Sun.
Madame, it appears you're not a true follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. Otherwise, you wouldn't have needed to rehearse beforehand, Lumian clicked his tongue and criticized.
Charlie, who had been listening, was taken aback.
Is "Little Minx" Jenna also someone with magical powers?
I'm the only ordinary person here...
Jenna's performance, even in the presence of imaginary official Beyonders, gradually bolstered her confidence.
Franca observed quietly, her eyes flickering, her mind filled with trivial thoughts.
If Jenna and I possessed the powers of an Actor, we would make perfect cosplayers, capable of becoming anything we desired. Tsk tsk… she thought to herself.
After some time, Jenna regained her composure and looked at Charlie warily.
"I've heard that you enjoy giving speeches in bars and twisting other people's secrets into stories.
"If you dare to f*cking reveal my Beyonder powers, I'll hand you over to a homosexual Sex Addict. Heh heh, just imagine the suffering you'll endure."
Charlie couldn't help but pause for a moment. He shuddered and raised his right hand.
"Praise the Sun. I swear in God's name that I won't divulge your

secret!
"I just mentioned that you and Ciel became lovers..."
Charlie suddenly stopped, sensing the strange atmosphere in the living room once again.
Lumian shrugged at Franca, signaling that it was merely a rumor.
Jenna scoffed.
"Will you also spread the rumor that Franca joined Ciel and me to form a stable love triangle?"
"No," Charlie quickly shook his head.
At the same time, he found the idea rather intriguing. It hadn't occurred to him before.
Jenna settled back into the armchair and continued to recount her knowledge of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Lumian and Franca listened attentively, occasionally posing questions to guard against potential threats.
...
In Underground Trier.
A figure with a lantern in hand moved cautiously along a familiar path, searching for something.
This person, of average height, wore a black tailcoat, a matching bow tie, and a half top hat. His face had a square shape, with short and thick eyebrows. The lines on his face were etched deep, and he sported a well-groomed brownish-yellow beard, carefully waxed at the tips.
The lantern's flickering light cast eerie shadows on his countenance, lending him an air of profound melancholy.
After walking for some time, the man halted, his gaze directed towards a section of the tunnel that had suffered a slight cave-in.
His dark brown eyes narrowed, focusing intently for a moment, before he suddenly dropped to all fours, his nose twitching.
The scent of gunpowder... and blood... The man rose solemnly to his feet and approached the collapsed area.
Through the layers of debris, he seemed to discern the glimpse of an incomplete corpse.
...
The atmosphere on Rue des Blouses Blanches was much quieter at night compared to Rue Anarchie. Except for the occasional clamor caused by passing carriages and the inebriated stumbling their way home, the night seemed to have fallen into a stillness.
From time to time, a distant gunshot would break the silence, its echo piercing through the night only to be swallowed by the darkness and moonlight.
Lumian and his companions engaged in intermittent conversation, their nerves on edge, apprehensive that shadows

might suddenly emerge from the darkness beyond the window.
Time dragged on slowly. For Charlie, it felt like awaiting a verdict. He was restless, anxious, yet filled with a glimmer of hope.
Finally, the distant skyline began to be tinged with a golden-red hue. Before long, the entire night was bathed in the crimson light.
"We should be safe now," Franca declared, sitting upright in her recliner.
Lumian glanced at Charlie and noticed that his luck was no longer drenched in blood-red. It had returned to its normal state, and there were even hints of prosperity.
The immediate crisis has been averted, but if Susanna Mattise manages to escape, will Charlie obtain a position with the authorities? Lumian pondered over it and nodded.
"For the time being, all I can say is that we should be fine."
Through this encounter, he confirmed one thing: even without the Luck Transference Spell, human luck could change.
He felt that the future was shaped by multiple factors. Different choices could lead to diverse outcomes.
If Lumian had followed Osta Trul and provided protection instead of forewarning him of impending disaster, perhaps he wouldn't have suffered injuries. However, that didn't guarantee a turn for the better. Lumian's protection might have implicated Osta Trul, leading him to be dragged to the river's depths by another water ghost, losing his life.
Does inevitability imply that regardless of the choices one makes, a predetermined fate will inevitably manifest? Lumian turned his gaze towards Jenna, the underground songstress and apprentice actress.
Jenna possessed average luck—neither filled with fortuitous encounters nor beset by grave dangers.
In high spirits, Jenna furrowed her brow and asked, "Why are you staring at me?"
After a night of acclimatizing, she refrained from uttering vulgarities and put more thought into her words.
Lumian pointed to his eye sockets.
"Are you planning to go to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons looking like that?"
"Oh, right! I haven't taken off my makeup!" Jenna exclaimed, getting up and rushing into the washroom with a stack of clothes.
Franca stood up and stretched, paying no mind to her appearance.
She glanced at the washroom and whispered to Lumian, "Will the act be convincing?"
"Yes," Lumian replied with confidence.
Previously, he hadn't been entirely sure, but after observing

Jenna's current state of luck, he was more certain.
Franca chose to place her trust in Lumian.
"I'll keep a close watch on her as well."
She clicked her tongue and let out a sigh.
"You seem rather skilled at deceiving the official Beyonders. Just as I expected from a..."
She mouthed the final words silently—"wanted criminal."
Not just deceiving the official Beyonders... Lumian whispered to himself, pointing at Charlie.
"I'll take him back to Auberge du Coq Doré to rest, just in case the official Beyonders can't locate him. I'll leave Jenna in your care."
"You make it sound like she's truly your lover. Asking me to look after her," Franca retorted with a sour tone.
By the time Jenna finished removing her makeup and changing her clothes, Lumian and Charlie had already departed. Franca had also informed 007 about the altar, the Actors, and the other information she had gathered.
At that moment, Jenna's face was no longer adorned with smoky eyes, pronounced blush, and fiery lips. She appeared clean-faced, albeit a bit fatigued.
As Jenna braided her brownish-yellow hair, she glanced at the door and grinned at Franca.
"When did you become involved with Ciel? Aren't you afraid the Boss will find out?"
Franca chuckled.
"Him? It'll be far too sinful; I can't bring myself to do it."
"Why?" Jenna couldn't comprehend.
To her understanding, Franca's moral boundaries weren't that strict. Ciel was only a few months away from adulthood.
Franca pondered her words and responded, "After getting to know him better, I discovered that he's the younger brother of one of my relatives."
"So you're related by blood." Jenna nodded in understanding.
However, her attention quickly shifted. After securing her braids, she pointed towards the door.
"I'm going to Église Saint-Robert to offer my prayers."
"I'll follow you discreetly to ensure nothing untoward happens."
Franca retrieved some fluorescent powder and, with an incantation, blended it in to conceal herself.
When will I become a Witch... Jenna averted her gaze enviously, opened the door, and stepped outside.

Chapter 217: Notarization

Église Saint-Robert stood proudly near the Suhit steam locomotive station, serving as the bishop cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Its distinctive onion-shaped dome was painted in shimmering gold, representing the radiant sun. Below it stood a white building with gilded edges and a monumental Sun Sacred Emblem.

Adjacent to the cathedral was a bell tower, crowned by a roof fashioned from a gleaming golden sphere.

Observing Jenna entering the cathedral amidst the morning prayer congregation, Franca opted to wait in close proximity.

Uncertain whether the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral possessed any peculiar enchantments that could render her invisibility ineffective, she remained cautious, unwilling to take any unnecessary risks.

Église Saint-Robert, much like other cathedrals belonging to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, boasted a resplendent golden base and was adorned with gilded accents throughout. The ornate structure, adorned with vibrant stained glass windows and a vast mural depicting a saint in vivid hues of blue, green, and red, exuded an atmosphere of profound sanctity and grandeur. Every worshiper who entered its hallowed halls couldn't help but bow their heads in reverence, enveloped by the sacred ambiance.

Jenna made her way to the front of the altar and settled into the second row of seats.

Closing her eyes, she inclined her head forward and crossed her arms, placing them reverently upon her chest.

Having been baptized and frequented the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral since her youth, Jenna was intimately familiar with this customary ritual, even though she could hardly be considered devout. She swiftly cleared her mind of any distracting thoughts, focusing her entire being on the act of prayer.

Time seemed to stand still as the bishop delivered his sermon.

After nearly fifteen minutes, Jenna opened her eyes and quietly rose to her feet. She proceeded towards a long table positioned along the side of the main hall.

This table spanned an impressive length of 20 to 30 meters, adorned with slender white candles flickering within golden lamps.

Devotees seeking to express their gratitude or admiration for a saint or angel could purchase a candle from the clergyman stationed beside the table, lighting it and placing it within an unoccupied lamp.

Jenna fixed her gaze upon the softly swaying flames for a few fleeting moments before redirecting her attention towards the clergyman dressed in a white robe interwoven with threads of gold.
Her eyes caught sight of a man engaging in the purchase of candles.
He appeared to be in his late twenties, his blond hair immaculately styled and subtly enhanced with cosmetics. His eyes resembled the vivid azure of a tranquil lake, albeit relatively small in size.
Adorned in a white shirt, a yellow vest, and a slim blue tweed coat adorned with two golden buttons, he bore a resemblance to the slightly distinguished gentlemen of Trier, with discernible traces of makeup enhancing his features.
As the man approached an unoccupied lamp with his acquired candle, Jenna moved closer to the clergyman in the resplendent white robe interwoven with golden threads, extending her arms in a welcoming gesture.
"Praise the Sun!"
"Praise the Sun!" the clergyman warmly replied, his smile radiating genuine warmth.
Jenna hesitated briefly for a couple of seconds before uttering, "I seek a blessed necklace."
Comparing it to the purchase of candles, this act was more devout.
But, naturally, it came with a higher price tag.
The clergyman's smile widened.
"Sister, how about this one?"
He produced a necklace adorned with a gold Sunbird pendant from among the unsold white candles.
Two rose-red rubies were nestled within the eyes of the Sunbird.
In the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, just as "Brother" was used to address men of the faith, female believers were affectionately called "Sisters." Some nuns even formed an alliance known as the Nine Sisters Association, working hand in hand with the Brotherhood Minor.
Jenna couldn't help but sense that this particular necklace must be quite expensive—she could almost hear her wallet crying in protest.
After careful consideration, she ultimately settled on a relatively simple amulet featuring a small Sun Sacred Emblem.
It set her back 30 verl d'or, causing her to wince at the cost.
As an underground singer in the market district, Jenna earned a decent income, especially since her recent rise in popularity. However, it had only been a month since she began gaining

recognition. Previously, her earnings were barely sufficient to cover rent, food, performance attire, makeup supplies, and the like, without having to rely on her family for financial support.
Despite now earning nearly 300 verl d'or a month through part-time work, her financial situation still left her feeling uneasy. She had to save for next year's tuition, ensure her mother wouldn't worry, and even contribute to the family's debts.
With the newly acquired amulet adorning her neck, Jenna took a deep breath and departed from Église Saint-Robert, making her way to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons before 9 a.m.
The classroom for apprentice actresses was located on the second floor, and Jenna passed by the manager's office on her way.
The door remained tightly shut, indicating that Maipú Meyer hadn't arrived at the theater yet.
Could he have really fled? Jenna averted her gaze and continued forward.
Shortly thereafter, she walked past the locked door of the exclusive break room belonging to the popular leading actress, Charlotte Calvino.
The door was locked as well.
Jenna exhaled quietly, straightened her posture, and turned into the classroom.
She was late. Gaspar, the instructor for today's first acting class, had already arrived and was busy addressing a private question from one of the apprentices.
Gaspar, despite being a middle-aged man of dignified demeanor, had the ability to portray a charming playboy on stage.
...
Deep within Underground Trier, nestled within a hollow strewn with remnants of tree branches and vines...
The very center had collapsed, leaving the soil in a state of disarray. Faint marks, as if from hurried footsteps, led towards an unknown destination.
Angoulême de François followed the path indicated by the cardinals and found himself standing at the precipice, his eyes fixed on the bewildering sight before him.
Those filthy rodents had relocated once more!
In response to the signal from the cardinals, Angoulême unsheathed a golden longsword that appeared to be forged from condensed light from a grayish-white mechanical doll.
With a swift motion, the sword plunged into the ground, causing the bluish-green and withered branches and vines to erupt into flames. Yet, no trace of black smoke ascended.
As the fiery shroud dissipated, the true nature of the ground, walls,

and ceiling came into view for Angoulême and his companions.
A multitude of serpents, slimy and cold, writhed and entwined, engaging in frenzied mating rituals. Countless gray rats tore at each other relentlessly, refusing to retreat until death claimed them. Diverse insects devoured leaves and soil with such voracity that they burst open from overindulgence...
...
As the realization dawned upon Franca that the plainclothes police had covertly sealed off Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, she swiftly withdrew from the brick-red three-story edifice and sought refuge in a nearby side alley. From her concealed vantage point, she observed the situation unfolding on the second floor.
As the first acting lesson neared its end, Jenna couldn't help but notice the conspicuous absence of Maipú Meyer, who typically lingered by the classroom door.
Just then, a group of black-uniformed police officers entered, clutching lists in their hands.
The leader called for a momentary pause in the lecture and addressed the assembled individuals.
"Maipú Meyer has been confirmed as a heinous heretic. We must ascertain your faith."
Gasps and exclamations erupted, momentarily plunging the scene into disarray.
"Silence!" bellowed the leading officer. "I shall read out your names, and you will sign this pledge as a witness before God. No one shall deceive."
Ascertaining of faith... Jenna's racing heart found a measure of solace.
One by one, the teachers and apprentice actresses stepped forward, receiving a pledge form from one of the police officers. They diligently completed their declarations of faith, appending their signatures to solidify their commitment.
Before long, Jenna heard her own name being called.
"Celia Bello."
She approached with composure, collecting a pledge form and a scarlet fountain pen.
The contents of the pledge were as follows:
"I solemnly swear that my faith in the ____ remains unyielding to this day.
"Affirmer: ____
"Notary: ____
Jenna filled in the first two blanks with "Eternal Blazing Sun" and "Celia Bello" respectively before returning the completed pledge and the fountain pen to the police.

Once all the actors and apprentices had signed the pledge, they were instructed to remain confined within the classroom, rehearsal room, and other designated areas until further notice, unable to venture beyond those confines.

...

Within the manager's office that had previously been occupied by Maipú Meyer, a gathering took place to collect the signed pledges.

Several devout members of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, known as Beyonders, took turns wielding a fountain pen crafted from pure gold. With deliberate strokes, they inscribed the initials "D.E." in the designated Notary space.

The ink they used appeared to be a vivid shade of crimson, reminiscent of fresh blood.

Upon the completion of each pledge, a shimmering golden aura would briefly envelop the document before dissipating back to its original state.

Every so often, a pledge would emit an ominous, blood-red glow, accompanied by piercing screams emanating from the same floor.

Even those actors and apprentices who employed aliases, long-established pseudonyms recognized by those in their midst, possessed mystical connections that were intricately intertwined.

...

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 504.

Charlie lay restless in bed, his weariness unable to lull him into sleep.

All of a sudden, a knock echoed through the room.

"Who's there?" Charlie called out, startled, as he sat up in bed, resembling a startled bird.

"Angoulême de François." The voice from beyond the door was deep, yet carried a compelling warmth.

Charlie's mind immediately conjured the image of the Monsieur who had interrogated him about Madame Alice's demise. Hastily, he rose from his bed and swung the door open.

Standing before him were Angoulême, with his blond hair, golden brows, and beard, and Imre, whose brown skin and full lips bore the traces of Southern Continent heritage.

"What brings you here, Monsieur François?" Charlie inquired cautiously.

Simultaneously, a thought flashed across his mind.

Could these be the official Beyonders whom Ciel and Red Boots mentioned?

Angoulême did not immediately respond. He stepped into Charlie's room, gesturing for Imre to shut the wooden door behind them.

Casting a sweeping glance around, he finally spoke.

"I bring bad news. Susanna Mattise is not entirely deceased. She may appear before you at any time in the future."
Charlie couldn't conceal his disappointment, pain, confusion, and fear.
"What should I do?"
Angoulême nodded gently.
"But there is good news as well. We intend to offer you a clerical position within our ranks. This will provide you with enhanced protection.
"Your monthly salary will amount to 320 verl d'or, and there will be a confidentiality agreement in place as compensation. For the initial one or two months, you will need to undergo an Intisian improvement course. Consider it an internship period, with a stipend of 200 verl d'or. Once you successfully pass the assessment, you will become a full-time employee.
"Are you willing? We do not wish to force this proposal upon you."
320 verl d'or per month? And improved protection? These words echoed within Charlie's mind. He believed that no ordinary person could turn down such a remarkable opportunity.
He was satisfied even with his current job as an attendant, which earned him 80 verl d'or monthly!
Recalling the hints dropped by Lumian and Franca, Charlie responded with surprise and delight, "Absolutely no problem!"
...
By the window of Room 207, Lumian positioned himself in front of a wooden table, observing Charlie as he followed the two strangers towards Avenue du Marché.
He focused his attention, seeking any changes in Charlie's luck, but found none.
This meant that the two individuals were not Actors manipulating the situation!
Lumian's gaze then shifted to the blond man, intrigued to discover what kind of fortune the official Beyonder possessed.
Suddenly, an intense wave of danger washed over him. He instinctively crouched down, reducing his profile.
Angoulême turned his head, his eyes filled with confusion, as he looked at the Auberge du Coq Doré's windows.
He sensed that someone was observing him.

Chapter 218: Promise

After Charlie and the two official Beyonders departed Rue Anarchie, Lumian settled back down at the wooden table, berating himself internally.

How could I forget? I mustn't gaze upon what I ought not to!

The same applied to observing luck!

Previously, he believed that scrutinizing one's luck was a subtle affair, unlikely to be detected. Neither Sequence 7 Franca nor the equivalent of a Sequence 7, "Black Scorpion" Roger, had noticed anything awry. However, the previous official Beyonder had displayed an unmistakable reaction.

Does his Sequence far exceed mine, or does he possess special abilities, or perhaps he wields a corresponding mystical item? Lumian struggled to determine.

He had never observed Beyonders beyond Sequence 7, lacking a point of comparison. Whether it was Gardner Martin or Mr. K, he exercised caution and refrained from examining their luck in their presence.

Having taken note of the lesson, Lumian, who didn't require sleep, perused the copied grimoire of Aurore.

The sunlight grew more intense, transforming the window into a radiant source. Even the bustling Rue Anarchie appeared like a golden oil painting.

In comparison to Backlund, the capital of the Loen Kingdom, Trier remained bathed in sunlight. Despite its pollution, the city's industrial layout was relatively sensible, confining the impact to specific areas. Most of it lay to the south, where factories were abundant.

Knock, knock, knock!

Someone rapped on Room 207 once again, yet this time, Lumian failed to discern any footsteps.

Arching his right eyebrow, he stowed away the papers on the table and turned toward the door.

"Come in. It's unlocked, Madame Red Boots."

With a creak, the door swung open, and Franca stepped inside, donning a blouse, beige trousers, and red boots.

In surprise, she inquired, "How did you know it was me?"

Why ask the same question as Jenna? Should I praise her for being a worthy student of an Assassin like you? Lumian replied, amused, "Because I possess a brain."

"Don't make it sound like I lack one," Franca responded calmly, settling herself on Lumian's bed.

Lumian chortled.

"I can't think of anyone else capable of approaching my room without my notice and knocking on the door politely."
Naturally, he had to exclude Madam Magician first. She lacked such diligence. It was impressive enough that she managed to reply in time!
After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian inquired, "Has Jenna's predicament been resolved?"
Franca clicked her tongue. "You have an uncanny foresight, brat."
She assumed the role of an elder sister.
"It's a rather straightforward deduction." Lumian displayed a disdainful expression for explanation.
If Jenna is still in danger, how could you, Hidden Blade, find the composure to seek me out?
Franca laughed dryly.
"I was referring to your astute guess that the authorized Beyonders would primarily investigate whether Jenna and the others are followers of evil gods."
After all, I'm closer to an evil god than any evil god believer here...
Lumian raised his right hand and gently patted his left chest.
With a smile, he responded, "Such insights stem from the ample experiences of a wanted criminal."
"You seem quite proud," Franca teased.
Curious, Lumian inquired, "How did the authorized Beyonders conduct their investigations?"
The more he learned, the more confident he would become in evading similar inquiries in the future.
Franca responded with an air of indifference, "Based on Jenna's account, I reckon they utilized the powers of a Notary."
"Each person had to sign a pledge of their faith, a pledge witnessed by a Notary. Heh heh, those who lied were engulfed in burning golden flames. They bled profusely and were dragged away."
Aware that Lumian was still delving into the realm of mysticism, Franca proceeded to provide a detailed explanation,
"Notary-related abilities are quite common in Trier. They can be found in various places, disguised under different guises.
"Notaries have the ability to create contracts with mystical effects. Once the parties affix their signatures to a similar contract in the presence of a Notary, they are bound by it unless they are demigods. Even at the demigod level, breaking the contract requires a substantial price. For transactions involving millions, or even tens of millions, of verl d'or, both parties are willing to pay a hefty sum and receive notarization in front of the God of Deeds' Sacred Emblem at a cathedral.
"The pledge is a special contract."

"The Eternal Blazing Sun is also known as the God of Deeds and the Guardian of Businesses."
It aligns with Aurore's grimoires... Lumian inquired, "Has Jenna returned home?"
Franca nodded subtly. "She needed to catch up on sleep."
Franca scrutinized Lumian. "You seem lively. I can't tell that you haven't slept all night."
"I'm accustomed to it." Lumian couldn't reveal that his condition would automatically restore itself at six in the morning. "You also appear quite energetic."
Franca smirked and replied, "I'm accustomed to it as well. For people like us, the night is the beginning of revelry."
If Aurore had made that statement, words like "inspiration," "drafts," and "tranquility of the night" would have crossed Lumian's mind. However, when Franca said it, he could only associate it with "orgies," "large beds," and "romping."
Unaware of his critical thoughts, Franca continued, "Apprentice training at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons will be suspended for three days. The theater will be temporarily occupied by the police headquarters. The daily performances will carry on as usual to avoid impacting the National Convention elections. However, the repertoire will be adjusted. Some plays have lost their female leads."
"Charlotte and Maipú Meyer are gone?" Lumian asked.
Though he had suspected that Susanna Mattise hadn't been completely purified when Charlie left with the official Beyonders, he still felt a tinge of disappointment upon hearing Franca's account.
Franca nodded.
"Apart from them, two others are missing: the real Ive and Lolth."
"Among the remaining actors and apprentices, a total of seven have converted to the Mother Tree of Desire. They were exposed, but it seems none of them received any boons."
So, those who received boons have fled, while the mere believers have been abandoned? Lumian scoffed inwardly as he relayed Charlie's departure with the suspected official Beyonders to Franca.
Franca let out a soft sigh.
"This is the best outcome for him. We can't protect him every single day.
"Though the official Beyonders can't either, they can arrange for Charlie to stay in a relatively safe place until Susanna Mattise's matter is truly resolved.
"In comparison, you're in more danger. Didn't you mention that Susanna Mattise holds a grudge against you? Evil spirits can be

quite fixated."
That will give me a good chance to test Mr. K's finger... Lumian silently muttered, indicating that he would be cautious.
Something crossed his mind, and he inquired, "Do you know why our Savoie Mob supports Hugues Artois?"
Franca smiled. "If I had that figured out, I wouldn't be part of the Savoie Mob anymore."
Hmm... *Is that her primary reason for joining the Savoie Mob?* Lumian pondered.
Franca stretched, stood up, and addressed him, "We truly have a chance to acquire Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons at a low price, but we might have to face the enmity of those Scrooges. However, you have nothing to fear. Yes, I'll go to Rue des Fontaines to discuss with Gardner and resolve my problem while there."
"What problem?" Lumian was puzzled.
Franca responded with a smile, "Even though the desires Rentas evoked were suppressed by the mysticism smelling salts, my body still feels a bit restless. When I recall that sensation, I feel somewhat empty, longing for fulfillment and release. Since you can't help me, I have no choice but to find my true lover. Why aren't you affected at all?"
There were indeed residual effects, but I was fine after six in the morning... Lumian pursed his lips and replied, "My willpower is stronger than yours."
Franca sneered, walked towards the door, and exited Room 207.
Lumian watched her leave, deep in thought.
Has Franca become the Boss's mistress, or has the Boss become Franca's lover?
Is Franca responsible for satisfying the Boss, or is the Boss responsible for satisfying Franca?
Just before noon, Charlie returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He packed his meager belongings into his suitcase and descended the stairs with it.
Spotting Lumian on the second floor, he glanced around and lowered his voice.
"I have a new job and need to move elsewhere. After some time, I should be able to return to the basement bar for a drink."
Lumian smirked once again. "Sounds good."
If Susanna Mattise's issue could truly be resolved, Charlie's fate would change.
Charlie also seemed pleased. He pondered for a moment and stated, "There are many things I can't tell you, but when the time comes, I'll try to drop hints for you."
In the Inquisition beneath Église Saint-Robert, he had come across

Ciel's wanted poster and recognized his friend, yet he didn't inform Deacon François.
What does that mean? Why does Charlie suddenly feel he can be useful? Does his new job have a close connection to the official Beyonders, allowing him to gather valuable information? Lumian swiftly formed a hypothesis.
With a mischievous grin, he remarked, "First, focus on staying alive before contemplating anything else! I might leave the market district in a few weeks."
The implication of his words was, "Do your job well and don't even think about leaking information. Don't attempt it unless your life is truly at stake."
Whether Charlie understood or not, Lumian wasn't entirely certain. After all, this guy wasn't very smart.
...
After spending the afternoon at Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian changed into a grayish-blue worker's uniform and donned a dark-blue cap. He hailed a public carriage to take him to Rue des Pavés in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
As per his arrangement with Louis Lund, Lumian anticipated a response from Madame Pualis regarding their meeting before the night fell.
Upon reaching the lobby of Apartment 9, Lumian opened the letterbox in Room 302, only to find a collection of fliers inside.
The letter hasn't arrived? Lumian suppressed his anxiety and decided to wait across from Apartment 9.
Just as he exited the lobby and descended the stairs to the roadside, he noticed a brown four-wheeled carriage approaching from a distance. It came to a halt right in front of him.
The carriage driver had jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes. He sported dark red attire, yellow trousers, a polished hat, and a white cravat. It was Louis Lund!
In the next instant, the carriage door swung open noiselessly, revealing the figure of a woman seated within.

Chapter 219: Probing

Lumian's eyes locked with Louis Lund, who occupied the driver's seat of the carriage, and received a confirmation nod.

Drawing a deep breath, Lumian strode toward the four-wheeled carriage, crouched down, and entered it.

He grasped the gravity of the situation.

Madame Pualis, cautious and aware, refrained from responding through letters. Instead, she concealed herself near 9 Rue des Pavés, anticipating Lumian's arrival for the reply. This strategy effectively minimized the risk of being trailed and cornered.

In the blink of an eye, Lumian's attention was seized by a familiar figure.

Adorned in a meticulously tailored black corset dress and a slightly mischievous lady's round hat, she exuded an elusive allure. Her untamed brows, lively brown eyes, and moist lips radiated a sense of allure. A cascade of brown hair, half-up and half-down, graced her shoulders. Although informal, her elegance, immaculateness, and enchantment remained undeniable. She was none other than Pualis de Roquefort, the wife of Cordu's administrator.

"Long time no see," Madame Pualis greeted him with a smile, yet her eyes emitted a frigid glare, sending shivers down one's spine.

Simultaneously, Lumian observed a shift in his surroundings.

The carriage vanished, leaving him stranded in a desolate wilderness.

There was nothing before him, and Madame Pualis had vanished into thin air.

Just as Lumian marveled at this bewildering turn of events, a colossal, irregular shadow emerged on the ground.

Instinctively, he raised his gaze, met by a reflection of brown feathers.

Each plume rivaled the size of his head, assembling into a pair of wings that seemed to obscure the heavens.

These wings belonged to Madame Pualis herself, who grew in stature, hovering in mid-air. Her feet transformed into avian talons, glistening with a chilling gleam.

A majestic, ethereal voice resounded.

"You should have been buried with Cordu!"

Lumian's heart constricted. Gripping his revolver, he swiftly pivoted and sprinted toward the edge of the wilderness.

If the visions within this dream held even an ounce of truth, he could escape Paramita once he reached its limits!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Lumian maneuvered in a curved path, firing rounds into the air.

This constituted his sole means of long-range assault.
Despite her immense size, Madame Pualis displayed remarkable dexterity. The gusts generated by her flapping wings disrupted the bullets' trajectory, enabling her to deftly reposition herself.
An ear-splitting screech emanated from her throat.
Ahead of Lumian, the earth beneath the wilderness upheaved, soil cascading away, unveiling yet another monstrous entity.
A python, long deceased, emerged from the ground. Most of its blue scales had decayed, exposing rotting flesh and jagged bones.
A repugnant odor filled the air as the python's entire body writhed with yellow pus and deformed worms.
Bloodshot eyes glared condescendingly at Lumian. Translucent silkworms squirmed in and out of its hollowed eye sockets.
The serpent's gaze landed condescendingly on Lumian before it lunged over, its maw open wide, its yellowed fangs aimed at the living prey.
Lumian's head spun from the putrid stench that permeated the air. With haste, he withdrew a sheet of drawing paper from his shirt and unfolded it.
A vibrant, golden-red sun adorned its surface.
Instantly, the surroundings grew warmer, and the sky, once obscured by Madame Pualis, brightened.
The long-deceased python averted its gaze from Lumian, seemingly unwilling to face the sun's brilliance.
Yet, its attacks merely slowed rather than ceased.
Seizing the opportunity, Lumian pivoted, clutching the drawing, and darted off in another direction.
Hovering mid-air, Madame Pualis parted her lips, uttering a sinister phrase unintelligible to Lumian.
An immediate weakness washed over Lumian, diminishing his running speed, as if a grave illness had befallen him, leaving him yet to convalesce.
Right on the heels of that, Madame Pualis raised her head, emitting a sharp, pained howl.
At that moment, Lumian perceived an ethereal shattering sound.
It reverberated within his soul and body, casting a veil of darkness over his vision, propelling him toward the threshold of death.
Had it not been for Hunter, Provoker, Dancer, and Alms Monk fortifying his constitution from various angles, Lumian might have succumbed to his enfeebled state.
Clutching onto his last vestiges of reason, Lumian endured the agonizing pain, mustering his dwindling strength to reach into his pocket and brush Mr. K's finger.
In an instant, he felt the refreshing touch of raindrops nourishing

his body and soul.
His injuries swiftly mended at a visible pace, while the surrounding wilderness gradually dissolved into illusion until it vanished entirely.
Lumian caught sight of Madame Pualis seated opposite him in the carriage.
The chill had evaporated from her gaze, replaced by a sneering mockery.
"With your feeble strength, you aspire to seek revenge against Guillaume Bénet?"
"When I departed Cordu Village, he gained a new boon after driving away us believers in the Great Mother. He now stands on par with a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator. In the future, he may even procure the corresponding potion for consumption."
Was her earlier attack merely a test of my capabilities? Lumian harbored no surprise at the padre's Sequence 5 status. After all, his contracted abilities far surpassed those of a Contractee, yet he clearly lacked godhood. That left only two possibilities: Sequence 6 or Sequence 5.
Considering Guillaume Bénet's performance in the dream and his clash against Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, Lumian had long suspected him to be a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator. Now, Madame Pualis had confirmed his suspicions.
What astonished him was that Recipients could consume potions to acquire additional abilities. However, they must choose the appropriate potion or a suitable alternative.
Lumian pondered for a moment, concluding that such occurrences were to be expected.
Beyonders themselves could receive boons; it was just that the process carried various complications.
Lumian met Madame Pualis's gaze and responded calmly, "I still have time to grow, and there's a chance for me to become stronger. However, Guillaume Bénet has little hope of attaining godhood. He doesn't believe in the three entities that the Great Mother is a part of. I'll catch up to him as soon as I can."
Unspoken by Lumian were his hopes of acquiring more formidable allies. Being an evil god's Blessed and having offended a follower of the Great Mother, Guillaume Bénet couldn't find many companions. They were likely wild Beyonders and Recipients who also believed in Inevitability.
Madame Pualis chuckled.
"Confidence is a good trait. I admire young people like you who are full of confidence. Would you like to join me and worship the Great Mother? By doing so, you can gain additional assistance. Apart

from the power of the potion, you can also receive boons."
"I'd rather not become pregnant and have children," Lumian declined Madame Pualis's kind offer in a tactful manner.
Madame Pualis smiled and replied, "It seems you haven't yet experienced the holiness, preciousness, and joy of life and the wonders of new beginnings. It's something I only came to fully comprehend after giving birth.
"But there's no need for you to refuse now. When you come to understand the greatness of the Mother, you can approach me anytime."
Lumian didn't wish to dwell on matters concerning the Great Mother, so he changed the subject.
"I thought you got others to have children. I didn't expect you to have one yourself."
Madame Pualis's face glowed with a maternal radiance.
"After becoming a Banshee, I had to bear a child myself in order to draw closer to the Great Mother."
It's hard to believe that you were once a man... Lumian almost hesitated to meet Madame Pualis's gaze. He swiftly redirected the conversation with a casual question.
"Did your child perish in the castle?"
"Yes," Madame Pualis sighed. "His father killed him with his own hands. Regrettably, he was unaware that the child was his."
"Who?" Lumian blurted out.
Madame Pualis smiled.
"Guillaume Bénet. Didn't you witness our affair? He didn't notice, but I knew you were hiding behind the altar. I even considered inviting you to join us."
I assumed your affair was merely symbolic... Some of it was real?
Lumian was taken aback as several images flickered in his mind:
Madame Pualis and the padre entangled in their nakedness.
Madame Pualis praising the padre's audacity, forthrightness, and masculinity.
The padre having Saint Sith put up with the transgression...
Noticing Lumian's change in expression, Madame Pualis smiled and continued, "After arriving in Cordu and familiarizing myself with the surroundings, the first thing I did was seduce Guillaume Bénet.
"He held true authority as a clergyman and was the only means for Cordu to connect with the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. If I could bring him down and make him a believer of the Great Mother, combined with Béost's identity, I could have truly established Cordu as my territory without arousing suspicion from the outside world.

"Coincidentally, I also needed a child. So, I decided to put him to the test. Within a week, I secured his bloodline as a contingency plan. However, around July or August of last year, his attitude suddenly changed, and he lost interest in the Great Mother. Unfortunately, I didn't even have the opportunity to let him bear a child for me to experience the wonders of life."
"Last July or August?" Lumian repeated.
Every year, shepherds returned to the mountains during May and June.
"Yes, I remember it vividly," Madame Pualis chuckled. "Later, that fool Louis Lund even attempted to seek his assistance."
Lumian furrowed his brow and asked, "Why did the padre's attitude change all of a sudden?"
"I'm not entirely sure. All I know is that during that time, some villagers were spreading distorted ideas about horoscopes, and they were reported to Guillaume Bénet. After interrogating those individuals, Guillaume Bénet's demeanor gradually shifted." Madame Pualis's eyes seemed to reflect the sunlight dancing on a lake's surface.
"Who were they?" Lumian pressed.
Madame Pualis smiled in response. "Nazélie and the others—people you are familiar with."
Lumian fell silent for a few seconds before speaking again, "Where were you, and what were you doing when the padre and the others attacked the castle?"
Pualis let out a brisk laugh.
"So, you finally ask. You should have already guessed the answer, right?"
She gazed at Lumian with a pained and twisted smile.
"Aurore attacked me."

Chapter 220: Nightmare

"Aurore attacked me."

The words echoed in Lumian's ears, crashing through his mind like a burst dam. A surge of memories flooded in, washing away the hidden horrors buried beneath the surface. They were ghastly, painful, and pierced his very bones.

One by one, scenes played out before Lumian's eyes. Guillaume Bénet, the padre, encircled by a horde of undead figures in the wilderness. Madame Pualis soaring through the air with her wings spread wide. And there, in her eyes, Lumian caught a glimpse of a familiar blond figure.

It was Aurore!

Lumian's gaze shifted to the castle's third-floor walls, covered in translucent faces of bluish-white hue. He witnessed Louis Lund giving birth, Sybil Berry being reborn within the body of a lady's maid, Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, Pons Bénet, and a group of believers of Inevitability engaged in a fierce battle against the midwife, Administrator Béost, and their companions.

All of this unfolded within Lumian's own visions, emanating from a small bubble floating in the air.

White Paper...

White Paper!

Lumian's face contorted in agony as he staggered backward.

Bluish-purple veins, densely packed, protruded from his body, each representing a blood vessel.

Meanwhile, the words of Psychiatrist Susie flashed through his mind: "Always remind yourself not to overreact. Whenever you feel a similar surge of emotions, take deep breaths and find your calm..."

Lumian gasped heavily, feeling as though the world around him had turned into a vacuum.

In an act of sympathy, Madame Pualis spoke, "You have indeed forgotten many things. No, you've buried them deep in your heart, afraid to confront them.

"I, too, suffered. It was not pleasant for me. After becoming a Banshee, it was the first time I encountered a woman who truly touched my heart. She possessed charm, kindness, gentleness, and a vibrant spirit. I never imagined that she, as a follower of the evil god, would turn against me.

"Even then, she was already a Fate Appropriator, favored by Inevitability more than Guillaume Bénet."

Lumian couldn't help but bring his hands to his head, as if it might explode from the intense pressure within.

Taking deep breaths, he recalled Aurore, who brushed off his concerns about the village's peculiarities. He remembered her cautioning him against laying eyes on forbidden things. He thought of Aurore, who would often sit on the roof at night, gazing at the vastness of the cosmos. The dream of the diaphanous "lizard" crawling out of Aurore's mouth resurfaced in his mind. He remembered how Nazélie and the others, the initiators of the horoscope heresy, had close ties to Aurore.

Amidst these recollections, Lumian also recalled his failure to avenge Reimund and Ava's deaths, discovering himself captured by Pons Bénet instead. He endured torment before finally being set free. He recalled Aurore, who had cut the livre bleu and assembled a plea for help together with him. He remembered Aurore explaining the mystical knowledge she possessed. And above all, he remembered Aurore pushing him off the altar during the ritual, her eyes flickering with a newfound liveliness...

Huff... Huff... Lumian gasped heavily, as if still trapped in the clutches of a never-ending nightmare.

A soft sigh escaped Madame Pualis's lips.

"I should have noticed her strangeness sooner. Although we didn't often cross paths, I always sensed something peculiar about her. The way she would gaze up at the night sky, speaking cryptic words about her hometown.

"In the realm of mysticism, the cosmos can be a treacherous place, especially for Beyonders.

"Later on, I wished for her to embrace the Great Mother's teachings, but alas, it was too late..."

Lumian's trembling lips struggled to form the question. "When... did she... start behaving strangely?"

He had a vivid recollection of Aurore's habit of stargazing and reminiscing about her homeland, but there had been no signs of trouble in the early years.

Granted, Lumian acknowledged that Aurore had been fixated on the cosmos more frequently over the past year, but he couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when it all began.

Madame Pualis shook her head, suppressing her emotions, and spoke with a hint of amusement.

"That's a question you must answer for yourself. You spend every day with her, whereas I do not. Sometimes, I envy you deeply. Yet, at other times, I believe you have your own merits. Why should we be bound by the rules of a conventional society, denying ourselves the freedom and joys of life?"

Lumian seemed lost in his own thoughts, barely registering Madame Pualis's words. He continued to hunch over, pressing his

head against the carriage floor. Muttering to himself, he questioned, "Who... who led her to embrace Inevitability?"
"Perhaps only she knows the answer. Unfortunately..." Madame Pualis sighed once more.
Lumian fell into silence, taking deep breaths to steady himself.
Once... twice... thrice... Time seemed to blur as he wrestled with his thoughts. Finally, he straightened his posture, lowered his hands, and turned his gaze towards Madame Pualis.
"Have you ever encountered an elf-like creature resembling a lizard in the village?"
"No." Madame Pualis shook her head.
The diaphanous "lizard" from my dream was merely a symbol. Did it represent the influence of Inevitability? Or did it actually exist, concealed deep within reality? Lumian pondered incessantly, as if this were the only way to prevent the razor-sharp blades from piercing his shattered heart.
He posed a new question.
"Have you ever come across the legend of the Warlock? The one about nine bulls being the only ones capable of pulling the coffin."
"No," Madame Pualis replied once more, shaking her head.
Lumian continued to inquire, one question after another. Eventually, he lost track of what he was asking and whether Madame Pualis had even responded. In his mind, her face became hazy, as though she were standing dozens or hundreds of meters away.
At some undetermined point, the four-wheeled carriage came to a halt. Lumian found himself back on the roadside, moving forward without purpose or destination.
Clang! Clang! Clang!
The cathedral bell tolled, signaling midnight.
Suddenly, Lumian snapped out of his daze, realizing he had returned to the Auberge du Coq Doré.
Almost instinctively, he ascended the steps and prepared to push open the door. But after a few seconds of shock, he retreated back onto the street, wandering towards the end of Rue Anarchie like a lost soul.
He walked until he reached Avenue du Marché. The sky, perpetually gloomy throughout the night, now became shrouded in thick, dark clouds. There was no crimson moon or stars to be seen.
Finally, Lumian arrived at the entrance of Salle de Bal Brise, where a cacophony of voices and the rhythmic beat of drums emanated, creating an unusually vibrant atmosphere.
Feeling overwhelmed by the environment, he abruptly spun

around, staggering to the side of the road. Finding a spot in the shadow, far away from the nearest gas street lamp, he sat on the ground.
Pitter. Patter. As time ticked by, raindrops began to fall, landing on the ground, his head, and before him.
The raindrops grew stronger, creating a steady patter.
Lumian remained motionless, as if he had transformed into a statue, allowing the rain to soak his hair, face, and clothes.
Suddenly, a shadow appeared above him, and the raindrops vanished.
Confused, Lumian looked up and saw a dark-blue umbrella, its metal frame supporting the fabric, held by Jenna.
He averted his gaze, staring blankly at the middle of the road where mist had started to rise. He made no effort to stop Jenna nor acknowledged her presence.
Jenna, wearing heavy smokey makeup and a sequined, low-cut red dress, draped a lightly-colored shawl with sizable holes over her shoulders to conceal some of her skin.
She observed Lumian for a few seconds, refraining from asking any questions. Standing beside him, she held the umbrella aloft.
The heavy rain persisted for an entire hour before gradually subsiding. Only scattered droplets now dripped from the buildings on either side and the street lamps.
Lumian rose slowly, as if he had lost something.
Jenna folded her umbrella and muttered, her voice barely audible.
"The rain will cease eventually, just as darkness always gives way. The sun is destined to rise, and its light will surely illuminate the earth."
Lumian remained silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the darkened road ahead.
"How would you feel when you discover that someone you trust isn't who you thought they were?"
Jenna didn't respond directly. Instead, she countered with a question of her own, "Do you still trust him?"
Lumian pursed his lips, his answer unwavering, "Yes."
"If you still trust him, then find out why he did it," Jenna advised, her tone calm.
Lumian's hands trembled slightly as he took a series of deep breaths.
Eventually, his body returned to normal, and he turned to face Jenna. "Why are you here?"
Jenna's reply carried both frustration and amusement, "Dammit! This is just outside Salle de Bal Brise! I didn't need to go to the theater tonight, so I came here to sing and make some cash. When

I stepped out, I spotted you sitting by the roadside, completely drenched."
Lumian averted his gaze and began walking forward, his expression devoid of emotion.
He splashed through puddles, striding toward Rue des Blouses Blanches.
"Where are you going?" Jenna asked, a hint of concern in her voice.
Lumian responded without looking back, "To find out the reason!"
He recalled Aurore's words when she pushed him away from the altar: "My grimoires..."
Considering the current circumstances, Lumian suspected that his sister was trying to convey that he could uncover clues about the source of the abnormality within her grimoires!
Jenna followed Lumian, holding the umbrella, and probed, "Do you think you can find the reason in just one night?"
"Perhaps it will take a long time," Lumian impatiently replied.
Jenna muttered under her breath, "Then why are you in such a hurry? Rest and clear your mind. It might help you uncover the reason more quickly."
Lumian contemplated his limited understanding of the grimoires' contents and his lack of mystical knowledge. He fell into silence.
Once again, he turned to Jenna. "Is Franca at home?"
"Why do you ask?" Jenna appeared perplexed. "She probably won't return to Rue des Blouses Blanches today. She mentioned wanting to spend a pleasant evening with Gardner Martin."
Phew... Lumian exhaled and redirected his steps toward Rue Anarchie.

Chapter 221: Venting

Jenna's gaze fixated on Lumian's retreating figure as she inquired, "Where are you off to?"

"Getting some shut-eye," Lumian replied without glancing back.

Pursing her lips, Jenna pondered for a brief moment before deciding to follow him.

She wanted to ascertain his final destination and see if he truly intended to return to the Auberge du Coq Doré to sleep. Otherwise, with his current state, she couldn't fathom the trouble he might stir up.

Ignoring Jenna's presence, Lumian ambled slowly back towards the Auberge du Coq Doré.

As he reached the motel's entrance, he discovered the main door firmly locked. Rather than scaling the pipes, he retrieved a small wire from his person and deftly inserted it into the brass keyhole, skillfully manipulating it.

The door swung open, revealing the murky interior. The only source of illumination emanated from the staircase leading down to the basement bar.

Lumian cast a fleeting glance and chose to descend in that direction.

Dammit! Didn't he claim he was going to bed? Jenna cursed inwardly and let out a resigned sigh. She trailed after him into the Auberge du Coq Doré's basement bar.

The bar wasn't bustling with patrons. Two or three inebriated men occupied a small round table, sporadically bellowing, but they lacked any significant strength.

The sole customer at the bar counter happened to be Lumian's neighbor, Gabriel, the playwright residing in Room 206.

Garbed in a faded linen shirt, brown trousers, and oversized black-framed glasses, Gabriel's hair appeared unkempt and greasy.

"You're still drinking at this hour?" Lumian settled beside Gabriel, his gaze fixed upon the glass of green absinthe clasped in the playwright's hand, shimmering with a psychedelic allure.

Has he returned to normal? Jenna appraised Lumian, sensing that his condition wasn't as dire as before.

Suppressing a yawn with her hand, she pulled a barstool over and took a seat, resolute in her intent to observe for another thirty minutes.

Gabriel forced a bitter smile and responded, "I just finished a manuscript and came down for a drink."

"Are all authors the same? Do you prefer to toil at night and slumber during the day?" Lumian rapped on the bar counter,

beckoning for a glass of absinthe.
Pausing for a moment, Gabriel replied, "Many authors are like that. Tranquil nights grant us greater inspiration.
"But that's not why I stay up late. I must visit various theaters during the day, persuading managers to peruse and accept my manuscript.
"Today, I went to the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. Their manager, Nathan Lopp, is renowned as the most astute theater manager. He possesses the highest likelihood of recognizing the value of my script. Yet, he refused to see me. I failed to meet him both at his office and during my visit to his apartment."
Upon hearing words like "theater" and "manager," Jenna inwardly gasped, a vague sense of trepidation creeping over her.
The fact that many individuals around her worshiped an evil god had left a lasting scar on her psyche.
Furthermore, their abilities were repulsive and twisted, evoking deep-rooted revulsion within her.
Lumian lifted the absinthe, proffered by the bar owner and bartender, Pavard Neeson, and took a sip.
"Do you happen to know where the theater manager lives?"
"Yes, I've visited him at his apartment before, along with other playwrights. He's still unmarried and often changes mistresses," Gabriel rambled on.
A grin crept across Lumian's face.
"I have a way to get that fellow to read your script, but I can't guarantee he will accept it."
"Really?" Gabriel was taken aback and perplexed.
There's actually a way? Jenna wondered, her mind filled with bewilderment.
Lumian swiftly finished his absinthe and rose to his feet.
"Let's go at once. Bring your script!"
"..." Gabriel had never encountered such a man of action.
It was already midnight!
With no remaining hope, he resolved to give it a try. Downing the last of his absinthe, he ascended to the second floor to retrieve the script for his three-act play.
Standing at the entrance of Auberge du Coq Doré, Jenna studied Lumian with a mix of puzzlement and curiosity. "Do you truly have a solution?"
Lumian scoffed dismissively. "You need not believe me."
"Heh!" Jenna expressed her disdain.
Uncertain if this was a consequence of his troubled state, she felt a twinge of curiosity and decided to follow Lumian to prevent him

from engaging in any rash actions.
Before long, Gabriel returned to the ground floor.
He had changed into a clean and respectable formal suit, complete with a crimson bow tie.
"Address," Lumian inquired calmly.
"Room 702, 15 Rue Defoe, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative." Gabriel gazed at the poorly lit Rue Anarchie, observing only a few inebriated individuals and wanderers.
He tentatively asked, "Shall we walk there?"
There were no public carriages available at this hour, and Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative was adjacent to the market district.
Lumian paid no attention to the query, instead strolling towards Avenue du Marché at a steady pace. He halted before a late-night-operating rental carriage, a four-wheeled two-seater, and addressed the driver, who sported the uniform of the Empire Carriage Company.
"To 15 Rue Defoe, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative."
The carriage driver, donning a waxed hat and a blue gown adorned with yellow buttons, scrutinized Lumian and his two companions before stating, "Two verl d'or."
In Trier, daytime travel in a rental carriage lasting less than an hour cost 1.25 verl d'or, with an additional 1.75 verl d'or per hour. After midnight until 6 a.m., short journeys were priced at 2 verl d'or, while longer trips incurred a charge of 2.5 verl d'or per hour.
Lumian remained silent, producing two silver coins worth 1 verl d'or each and tossing them to the carriage driver.
Showing no courtesy, he boarded the carriage and took a seat.
This left Gabriel in a predicament. Unsure whether he should act chivalrously and jostle with Ciel or allow the singer, Jenna, to make her own choice.
Eventually, realizing she hadn't been invited, Jenna grumbled and settled herself beside Lumian, striving to secure some personal space.
The rental carriage set off, embarking on its journey towards Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
During the ride, Lumian maintained an unsettling silence, leaving Gabriel hesitant to inquire about his solution. The atmosphere inside the carriage grew somewhat uncomfortable.
Having grown accustomed to Lumian's peculiar state that night, Jenna cleared her mind and focused on her own thoughts.
After an indeterminate period, the rental carriage came to a halt at 15 Rue Defoe.
Lumian wasted no time and headed straight for the apartment

building. Upon entering the lobby, he was intercepted by a vigilant guard.
"Which floor and room are you residing in?" the dutiful guard inquired. "If you're not a resident here, you need..."
Before the guard could finish his sentence, a chilling object was pressed against his temple.
Lumian had swiftly produced a revolver from under his armpit and pressed the barrel firmly against the guard's forehead.
"W-What do you think you're doing?" the guard, who appeared to be almost fifty, stammered.
Gabriel stood frozen, his mind filled with doubt regarding Ciel's supposed solution.
Amused and eager to witness the unfolding events, Jenna observed Lumian silently guide the guard to a secluded corner of the lobby. Using the rope and various items he had with him, he proceeded to bind the guard's hands and feet, effectively rendering him immobile. A gag was placed over the guard's mouth to ensure his silence.
With the task completed, Lumian shut the apartment door behind him and secured the lock before ascending the staircase.
As if awakening from a dream, Gabriel hastened after him, his voice filled with anxiety.
"Is that really okay?"
"What do you think?" Lumian replied with a grin.
Gabriel faltered, lost for words. He hesitated, contemplating whether he should abandon his pursuit of having Nathan Lopp, the manager of Théâtre de la Renaissance, read his script.
If I were to express my doubts and return now, would Ciel become furious and resort to violence? After all, he is a mob leader...
Gabriel gaped, incapable of uttering anything that might dissuade Lumian.
Soon, the trio reached the top floor and stopped outside Room 702.
Gabriel, poised to knock, witnessed Lumian deftly employ the short wire to open the vermilion wooden door.
"..." Gabriel couldn't make sense of Lumian's intentions in the slightest.
Observing this, Jenna swiftly removed her light-colored shawl and draped it over her face, exposing only her forehead and eyes.
She harbored suspicions that Ciel was about to cause trouble. To avoid being implicated by him, it was prudent to conceal her identity. At the very least, she couldn't allow anyone to remember her appearance.
Lumian stepped into the living room, awash with the glow of the crimson moonlight. Producing a bandage, he wrapped it around

his face, leaving only his eyes and nostrils visible.
"... " Though Gabriel failed to comprehend why Jenna and Ciel were veiling their faces, he instinctively found a cloth and covered the lower portion of his own face.
Enveloped in a white bandage, Lumian surveyed the surroundings before proceeding towards the master bedroom. He turned the handle and gently pushed open the door.
The living room was bathed in the luminosity of the crimson moon, illuminating the figures reclining in the bed.
There lay a man and a woman. The man boasted disheveled black hair, appearing to be in his early forties. His countenance was gaunt, with a prominent nose bridge. The woman possessed curly blond hair, seemingly in her twenties. Her complexion was flawless, and her features were strikingly beautiful.
Beneath the velvet blanket, they appeared to be unclothed.
"He's the theater manager?" Lumian didn't restrain his voice at all.
Gabriel felt as though he were trapped in a surreal reverie.
"Yes, that's him."
Lumian advanced swiftly towards the grand bed. The manager of Théâtre de la Renaissance, Nathan Lopp, stirred from his slumber upon hearing the commotion.
Before he could open his eyes, Lumian grasped his shoulder and hoisted him upright.
Nathan Lopp jolted awake, his eyes confronted with the sight of a head swathed in white bandages.
His heart seemed to skip a beat, rendering him speechless and devoid of protest.
In the next instant, a revolver was pressed against his temple.
Nathan Lopp sealed his lips shut and was propelled into the living room.
As he passed by Jenna, Lumian cast a sidelong glance towards the bed and whispered, "Keep an eye on that woman."
Jenna found herself bewildered by the unfolding events, yet it did nothing to quell her exhilaration.
Without hesitation, she lowered herself into a crouch, drew her own revolver, and trained it upon the recently awakened blonde. With a touch of cold detachment, she issued a stern warning, "I don't want to hear a word."
The blonde wrapped her arms tightly around the blanket, trembling on the bed.
Lumian settled Nathan Lopp into a recliner, securing his hands and feet to the sofa and floor using garments.
Perplexed, Gabriel came over. Suddenly, a thought struck him: Are we here to rob Nathan Lopp, or are we here to present him with

my script?
Jenna escorted the blonde, clad in a nightgown, to the living room. Lumian, who had illuminated the crystal chandelier, took a few steps back. He retrieved his revolver and seated himself on the divan opposite the recliner.
Nathan Lopp appeared freshly awakened and uttered anxiously, "How much do you want? I'll give it to you, everything! There's a total of 1,100 verl d'or and a diamond necklace here. I'll surrender them all! Just promise not to harm me!"
Lumian, his face concealed by bandages, turned towards Gabriel and stated, "Read it."
"Read what?" Gabriel responded, his mind blank.
Lumian let out a soft chuckle.
"Read your script. Monsieur Nathan Lopp is waiting."
Wh... Gabriel stood dumbfounded.
Is this the solution to making Nathan Lopp read my script?
Is this how a rational person thinks?
Not only Gabriel pondered this, but Jenna couldn't help but mumble to herself.
Ciel's mind is truly unhinged!
Won't this result in Monsieur Playwright being taken to the police station?
Thank goodness I've concealed my face!
With a similar sense of relief, Gabriel approached Nathan Lopp apprehensively. He retrieved the script and began reading it aloud, as if compelled to do so.
Nathan Lopp listened in bewilderment, questioning whether he was trapped in a ludicrous dream.
Halfway through his slumber, a masked intruder invaded his abode, binding him to a chair merely to subject him to a script recital?
As he listened attentively, Nathan Lopp's professional instincts kicked in, drawing him further into the script.
After the main dialogue of the first scene concluded, Nathan Lopp interrupted Gabriel.
"Who wrote this?"
"Me," Gabriel replied subconsciously.
Nathan Lopp's voice resonated deeply as he stated, "Bring it to my office tomorrow at 10 a.m. We'll sign the contract."
"Alright, alright." Gabriel's emotions swirled with surprise, happiness, and fear.
Will I find the police waiting for me at Théâtre de la Renaissance tomorrow?
Lumian chuckled, rising from his seat and making his way to the

door with his revolver.
Jenna and Gabriel followed closely behind, allowing the blonde woman to free Nathan Lopp from his restraints.
As they descended the stairs, Jenna flashed a smile at Gabriel and inquired, "Monsieur Playwright, your script is exceptional. Your words are captivating. What is its title?"
"It's called 'Lightseeker,'" Gabriel responded instinctively, unable to comprehend why an underground singer held such interest in the script.
Jenna quickened her pace to catch up with Lumian. Lowering her voice, she asked, "Is this your solution? Aren't you concerned that the theater manager may also be a devotee of an evil god?"
In her current state of mind, all theaters seemed suspect.
Lumian removed the bandages, his expression unwavering, as he replied, "Then we would have fought."
I knew it... Jenna silently muttered to herself.
After retrieving their belongings and ropes from the guard, the trio boarded a rental carriage and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.
Once Gabriel expressed his gratitude and retreated to his room, a mix of worry and joy, Jenna observed Ciel as he freshened up and settled onto the bed. Finally, she breathed a sigh of relief.
She drew the curtains and carefully closed the wooden door before departing Auberge du Coq Doré.
In the nearly pitch-black darkness, Lumian's eyes remained closed, unmoving.

Chapter 222: Fliers

Clang! Clang! Clang!

At the stroke of six, Lumian sat upright and flung open the curtains, allowing a gentle light to stream into the room, breathing life into the once silent space. He rubbed his face, freshened up, and attended to his needs.

Once ready, he changed his clothes and departed from Auberge du Coq Doré. Making his way around Rue des Blouses Blanches, he entered the rented safe house.

With great anticipation, Lumian delved into Aurore's grimoires, hoping to uncover some hidden gems that had eluded him in his previous search.

Aurore's grimoires contained three distinct categories of knowledge.

Firstly, there were the common mystical understandings—the names of various pathways, the state of certain Sequences, the foundations of ritualistic magic, the significance of symbolic elements, and the pronunciation and meanings of several supernatural languages.

The second category focused on the practical application of mystical knowledge and personal abilities. It demanded deep contemplation, as it contained numerous recorded or purchased spells, as well as defenses against curses.

Lastly, there were fragments of peculiar and incomplete knowledge, along with intriguing anecdotes. Some were bestowed upon Aurore by the Hidden Sage, while others emerged from interactions within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

These miscellaneous tidbits weren't organized into separate grimoires but appeared sporadically as Aurore acquired them.

For Lumian, the second category posed the greatest challenge. Warlock spells like Illumination, Weed Removal, Exorcism, Soul Summoning, Lightning, Wind Creation, and Force Field Hand proved to be perplexing. After all, he lacked the fundamental understanding of mysticism and the support of Beyonder powers required to cast spells.

On the other hand, Lumian had made significant progress in comprehending, learning, and mastering ritualistic magic since becoming an Alms Monk.

Lumian also noticed that his sister had omitted certain basic rules, such as the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation, from her grimoires.

However, this was to be expected. Such laws were scarce and easily remembered. They were ingrained in the mind and required no

additional recording.
After an extensive morning of reading, Lumian found no signs of suspicion. Instead, he accumulated a myriad of questions that demanded consultation with others.
He let out a slow exhale, carefully folded the pages containing his inquiries, and tucked them into his pocket before departing the safe house.
On his way to Avenue du Marché, Lumian's attention was caught by several voting booths. Uniformed police officers and heavily armed military police were working diligently to maintain order, allowing long queues of people to deposit their votes into wooden boxes.
Despite having acquired a new identification from Gardner Martin and assuming the persona of Ciel Dubois, a resident of the market district for nearly two years with the right to vote, Lumian chose not to register at all. He had no desire to partake in the parliamentary election.
After some time, a newsboy rushed by and tossed a stack of white papers into the air.
Lumian observed as many pedestrians eagerly collected the floating papers and began reading them with great seriousness. He bent down and retrieved a copy lying at his feet.
The white paper featured several lines of text in the Intis script, printed in a simple and easily comprehensible syntax.
"Hugues Artois is a traitor!
"In the war against the Loen Kingdom several years ago, he deserted his troops and fled. Countless fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons never returned!
"He is participating in the parliamentary election with clandestine support from the Loen Kingdom!"
Lumian couldn't contain his surprise upon reading the accusations.
He vividly remembered Hugo Artois's campaign posters emphasizing his military service. He had only retired from the army upon reaching the rank of major and ventured into politics, starting as an assistant secretary at the National Convention.
Could this be a desperate move from a candidate facing unsatisfactory early poll results? As Lumian pondered over the situation, a group of men, suspected to be mobsters, approached and forcibly confiscated the fliers from the pedestrians, resorting to physical violence and vulgar insults. Curiously, the nearby police officers seemed oblivious to the scene unfolding before them.
Lumian raised his gaze and recognized one of the men.

They were members of the Poison Spur Mob, the very individuals who had previously followed Margot and Wilson to Auberge du Coq Doré.
"You dare read something like that, you wretch?"
"You leper, hand me the thing in your hand!"
"Son of a bitch, do you want me to rough you up?"
The Poison Spur Mob members closed in on Lumian. Just as they were about to snatch the flier from his hand, their eyes fell upon his short blond hair with dark roots.
A mischievous grin crept across Lumian's face.
Ciel! The Poison Spur Mob members instinctively turned around, their intent to flee evident.
Lumian swiftly lifted his foot and delivered a forceful kick to one of the mobsters' rear, causing him to lose his balance and tumble to the ground.
"What's the matter? Can't recognize your pépé?" Lumian taunted, watching the disoriented Poison Spur Mob members scramble away in a disheveled state. He had no inclination to pursue them any further.
Lumian tossed aside the flier he held and strolled back to Salle de Bal Brise.
Immediately upon entering, Louis approached with Sarkota by his side.
"Boss, Charlie quit his job as a waiter last night and only asked for a week's worth of salary."
"I'm aware," Lumian responded calmly.
Louis recalled how the boss had taken Charlie away the previous night, returning without him. Shortly afterward, Charlie tendered his resignation and left. This sequence of events left Louis with a lingering suspicion that something secretive was at play, but he didn't dare inquire further.
Lumian cast a brief glance at Louis and casually inquired as he made his way towards the café on the second floor, "How old are you?"
"27," Louis answered, puzzled as to why the boss seemed interested in this particular detail.
Without much hesitation, Lumian continued, "Are you married? Do you have any children?"
"Not yet," Louis replied with an awkward smile. "I plan to get married when I'm more mature."
Though he had managed to escape the life of a low-ranking mobster and now served as the leader's bodyguard, eliminating the constant fear of being beaten to death on the streets, Louis recognized the inherent dangers that still lurked.

He didn't wish to benefit another man shortly after entering married life and having a child.
Lumian nodded.
"It's important to consider your future. The other Louis I know already has several children."
Louis brushed off the remark, perceiving it as an attempt by the boss to force a conversation when there was little else to discuss, as if trying to prove a point.
...
Franca skipped her lunch with Gardner Martin and returned to 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches before noon.
Upon reaching the house, she noticed that the door to the guest bedroom was tightly shut. Perplexed, she turned the handle and pushed it open.
Inside, Jenna lay fast asleep in her pajamas, huddled under a blanket.
Stirred by the door's movement, she rubbed her eyes and slowly sat up, her gaze fixed on Franca.
"Still snoozing?" Franca asked, her smile in place.
Just because you don't have acting lessons at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, you're letting yourself go like this?
Jenna combed through her tawny locks and grumbled, "It's all Ciel's fault; things went on late into the night."
"..." Franca's smile froze.
Jenna continued, "I don't know what happened to him last night, but his mood and condition were off. I was worried something might happen, so I followed him. Only after he entered Auberge du Coq Doré and got into bed did I return to get some rest."
Franca breathed a sigh of relief and inquired with concern, "Tell me everything."
Jenna recounted the events starting from her performance at Salle de Bal Brise, seeing Lumian sitting by the road in the rain, all the way until he employed an unimaginable "method" to secure Gabriel's script deal. Finally, she said,
"Dammit, it was almost three o'clock before he finally agreed to go back to his room and sleep. I was beyond exhausted!"
Franca listened attentively and expressed her worry, "It's rare to see him in such a state..."
Franca paused, a realization dawning on her.
Lumian was still undergoing regular treatment from a psychiatrist, and perhaps this state she witnessed was his truest form.
"He must have experienced some sort of trauma last night. I'll ask him about it later." After Franca referred to him as a relative, she

no longer concealed her close relationship with Lumian in front of Jenna.
Jenna nodded.
"Choose your words carefully. Don't agitate him."
...
On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, in Lumian's office, he noticed Franca, who had turned invisible.
"I heard from Jenna that something happened to you last night," Franca, dressed in a white blouse and black pants, asked casually. "Did you meet Madame Pualis?"
During her lunch with Jenna, she had managed to piece together what had triggered Lumian's mental distress.
Lumian seemed to lose all his strength upon hearing Franca's question and slumped into the swiveling armchair.
After a pause of more than ten seconds, he exhaled and said, "That's right. I can't accept the truth I learned, but I have no choice."
Sensing his reluctance to share further, Franca didn't press the matter. She nodded slightly and offered, "Is there anything I can do for you?"
Lumian straightened up and spoke bluntly, "Two things. First, I have numerous questions about mysticism. Second, the issue with the Poison Spur Mob.
"As I mentioned before, once the election is over, Hugues Artois will become a member of parliament. 'Black Scorpion' Roger and his cohorts will gain a new boon. In due time, we'll all be in danger. Should we launch a raid on 126 Avenue du Marché at night to eliminate any hidden threats before the election results are announced?"
Franca pondered for a moment and replied, "Based on your description, the Heretic Spellmaster holds a significant advantage on their home turf. Even if the two of us use our trump cards, our chances of successfully eliminating 'Black Scorpion' Roger and the others are uncertain, assuming there are no other surprises awaiting us.
"But if we don't act now, they will become even more formidable after receiving their new boons..."
She hesitated, unsure of the best course of action.
...
At 126 Avenue du Marché, within the three-story building with a garden.
"Black Scorpion" Roger gazed at his subordinate who had infiltrated the market district's parliamentary election commission and asked eagerly, "What's the situation?"

The subordinate replied with excitement, "Monsieur Hugues Artois is leading by a wide margin!"

A smile crept across "Black Scorpion" Roger's face. Once the subordinate left, he turned to "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, saying,

"The election results will be announced tomorrow afternoon. Lady Moon will personally oversee the ritual and grant us a boon during the night.

"Afterward, we won't hold back anymore. That wretched Ciel must meet his demise!"

Chapter 223: Choice

On a southeastern hill overlooking Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, there stood an active quarry.

Having departed from Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian embarked on a quest to find a suitable candidate, which led him to this very place.

The night was deep, and the lamplighters diligently illuminated the gas lamps strewn across the streets. In stark contrast, the quarry, having concluded its daily operations, was enveloped in darkness, devoid of any artificial illumination.

Scattered across the quarry floor were several gypsum furnaces, surrounded by numerous tramps.

Lumian honed his focus, meticulously assessing each individual's circumstances.

At long last, he discovered a target that fit his requirements.

Resting against one of the gypsum furnaces was a male tramp. His shirt, pants, and jacket were tattered, their original hue obscured by the dark brown soil. Sunken cheeks and emaciated limbs almost distorted his figure. His unkempt hair and beard intertwined in a mess of strands.

His eyes were half-shut, and his shallow breaths suggested he might perish at any moment.

According to Lumian's observations, the tramp was indeed approaching the end of his waning life. He had but two or three days left.

Approaching the figure, Lumian squatted down and retrieved the gas canister he had obtained from the unsavory Hedsey, whom Franca had aptly named Mysticism Smelling Salts. Unscrewing the lid, he positioned it near the tramp's nostrils.

He and Franca had already distributed Rentas's "remains." The sedatives and coins totaling 212 verl d'or belonged to Lumian, while the remainder was Franca's share.

Achoo!

The tramp sneezed twice, and his eyes fluttered open.

Weakly gazing at Lumian, donned in a blue laborer's uniform and a dark cap, he inquired, puzzled, "W-who are you? W-what are you trying to do?"

Lumian responded calmly, "I'm just a passing worker. I sensed that your demise was imminent, so I approached to verify."

The tramp found no fault in Lumian's explanation. In the Intis Republic, upon discovering a lifeless body, whether reporting to the governmental authorities or the two Churches, individuals would receive compensation for promptly ensuring purification or cremation.

Though the sum was meager, a mere 1 verl d'or, even the lower-class citizens found it a pleasant surprise, no matter how modest the additional benefits.
The tramp's beard trembled as he managed a smile.
"You guessed right. I also feel as if my time is drawing near. Drop by more frequently over the next two days, so your money doesn't get snatched away."
Perhaps it was the effect of the Mysticism Smelling Salts, or perhaps the topic of death momentarily stirred the tramp's spirits, for his words ceased to falter, and his reasoning became clearer.
"Have you got any family left?" Lumian inquired casually, squatting before the tramp as he stowed away the Mysticism Smelling Salts.
The tramp fell silent for a few moments, then slowly shook his head.
"No, not any more.
"If you're interested in my clothes, take them when I'm dead."
"Has your family passed on?" Lumian probed further.
The tramp's beard swayed with the motion of his muscles, and his voice carried an unmistakable tinge of anguish.
"They're gone. All gone. My parents didn't make it past 45. My brother fell in the war a few years back. My sisters succumbed to illness, and her child became a child laborer. By the age of ten, he was already hunchbacked and died from sheer exhaustion in a textile mill..."
The tramp seemed to stray from Lumian's question, more akin to a recollection before his impending demise. He rambled on, "I used to toil in the quarry, praised for my strength. Then, a Monsieur saw my diligence, believed I could endure hardship. He taught me to place detonators and loosen rocks. My pay rose, and life took a turn for the better. I had a wife, tough as nails just like me, and three precious children, but only one survived. My little angel, my daughter.
"When the food prices sparked protests, my body suddenly gave way, and I fell grievously ill.
"My wife and daughter spent everything, amassed debts. Eventually, they nursed me back to health, but I lost my job in the process. We were hounded by loan sharks day in and day out. Those men took away my little angel. My wife and I searched desperately. A few weeks later, we found her lifeless body. She couldn't endure their torment and chose to end it all.
"My wife wanted to turn to the police, but they beat her to death and dumped her somewhere. I was battered and left unconscious, but I survived. I've made it till today..."

Lumian listened in silence, his voice deep when he finally spoke, "Any wishes?"
The tramp laughed out loud.
"Wishes? My greatest wish is to pass away shortly after catching that illness."
Lumian fell silent for a moment before continuing, "No thirst for revenge?"
The tramp's eyes glazed over as he replied, "Those loan sharks were killed by other mobs. New loan sharks have taken their place."
He recollected Lumian's initial question and spoke in a voice that seemed to drift from another realm, "When my time comes, I think—I think I'd like to have another meatloaf. I remember those years, every weekend, my wife would buy the meat herself, add flax seeds and vinegar, turn it into a sauce, and stuff it between flatbread. My daughter adored it, and I loved it too..."
Lumian nodded, rising to his feet and making his way down the hill, toward the streets below.
After approximately 45 minutes, he returned to the gypsum furnace, carrying a Rouen meatloaf that filled the air with its enticing aroma.
The tramp seemed on the verge of fainting once more. Lumian employed the Mysticism Smelling Salts once again to rouse him from his stupor.
The tramp sneezed a few times, his gaze fixed blankly on the Rouen meatloaf. He quickly took bites, his beard becoming coated with a thin layer of oil.
Having consumed half of it, he gasped for breath and inquired with a smile, "What's your game, lad?"
"I'll be stabbing you later. It might just bring about your demise tonight," Lumian stated plainly.
The tramp chuckled weakly and queried, "Aren't you afraid of the police? I fear not death. I should've perished long ago. Did you know that every winter, I sleep inside this gypsum furnace? Even after a day's work, it retains a soothing warmth that lasts until nearly daybreak. However, the lingering fumes within are poisonous and could claim me in my sweet slumber. So far, it hasn't happened to me."
Lumian chuckled.
"I reckon the police aren't too bothered about how a tramp meets his end, so long as it's not a blatant murder."
Without further ado, the tramp devoured the remaining Rouen meatloaf and let out a belch.
After a pause of over ten seconds, he adjusted his position and spoke, "You may proceed."

Lumian drew his blade, Fallen Mercury, adorned with sinister patterns, and thrust it into the tramp's hand.
Blood trickled forth, staining the tip of the blade crimson.
Simultaneously, Lumian once again beheld the illusory river of mercury.
His purpose in seeking a near-death tramp was to exchange for a more practical fate!
This was not to say that encountering the fate of the Montsouris ghost wasn't formidable. Quite the contrary, it could lead to certain death or even the demise of an entire family for many humans. Furthermore, it clung tenaciously. However, the issue lay in the time it took to take effect. The exchange of fates could often be completed within minutes, whereas the Montsouris ghost's assault on its target occurred at random intervals. It might strike in ten to twenty minutes, or it might wait for three to four months.
In other words, the fate of "encountering the Montsouris ghost" was ill-suited for a surprise attack or a battle.
Furthermore, having learned from the experience and lessons of Margot's death, Lumian's target, "Black Scorpion" Roger, would undoubtedly be wary of such matters. If stabbed by Fallen Mercury and not instantly dispatched, there was a high likelihood that he would seek aid from Madame Moon. Lumian was uncertain if the lady possessing true godhood could fend off the Montsouris ghost. If she could, his operation would be an utter failure.
Considering these factors, he intended to preemptively alter the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost and choose a destiny more conducive to surprise attacks and assassinations. He desired "Black Scorpion" Roger to perish on the spot, without a chance to seek any assistance.
As these thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, a series of images "appeared" before him.
He saw the tramp, asleep inside the gypsum furnace, the tramp who had been viciously beaten and left unconscious, the tramp who had recently fainted, the tramp who had crumbled in front of his daughter's lifeless body, the tramp who had shared homemade meatloaf with his wife and daughter, the tramp who meticulously prepared and set up explosives...
Lumian knew he couldn't choose the tramp's destined fate of perishing in two or three days. It was an overwhelming burden, beyond what Fallen Mercury could bear. Even the Luck Transference Spell couldn't transfer such a dire fate.
The only solution Lumian could think of was to employ the Substitution Spell and find a death row inmate to take the tramp's

place. He would assume the inmate's identity for a period of time, gaining the acceptance of those around him. Then, he would perform the ritual and swap the tramp's impending death with that of the inmate. However, this process would take two to three weeks, if not longer, to prepare. Time was not on his side.

Drawing on his vast experience, Lumian made a quick decision and chose the fate of the tramp who had recently collapsed due to his failing body.

It departed from the mercury river and condensed into a droplet that seeped into the blade of Fallen Mercury. Simultaneously, the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost shifted entirely to the tramp.

Lumian retracted the wicked, pewter-black dagger. It remained clean and free from bloodstains, and the wound on the tramp's hand was shallow, as though it would soon leave a scar.

"That's it?" the tramp asked in puzzlement.

He had been prepared to meet his end then and there.

"Yes." Lumian stood up and departed from the hill.

Late that night, inside the gypsum furnace, the tramp convulsed suddenly and succumbed to suffocation.

...

Across from 126 Avenue du Marché.

Returning here, Lumian nestled in a shadowy corner, shielded from the glow of the gas street lamps. His eyes fixated on the target building.

Beside him, Franca emerged from the darkness, dressed in a black robe and hood.

"How did it go?" Lumian asked, entirely unsurprised.

Chapter 224: Disguise

Franca cast her gaze upon 126 Avenue du Marché and remarked, "Whether it's 'Black Scorpion' Roger, 'Baldy' Harman, or 'Short-legged Candlestick' Castina, none of them have shown themselves."

"Extremely cautious," Lumian objectively commented.

Franca let out a scoff.

"If I were in their shoes, I'd be cautious too. If I manage to make it through tonight, I can turn the tables and emerge victorious. How foolish would it be for me to reveal myself? Even if someone were to abduct Gardner and maim him at the doorstep, I wouldn't budge."

This example isn't convincing... Lumian asked, "What if it's Jenna who's bound instead of Gardner?"

"..." Franca fell silent.

Noticing the Provoker potion taking effect, Lumian, nearing the completion of his digestion, chose not to press further. Instead, he inquired, "What else have you observed?"

Neither Lumian nor Franca had devised a specific plan for the assault on "Black Scorpion" Roger and the others. They possessed only a handful of vague ideas and were currently engaged in preliminary investigations and preparations.

Franca pondered for a few seconds before revealing, "A member of the Poison Spur Mob frequents the election commission and this vicinity. It's as if he's providing 'Black Scorpion' Roger with real-time updates on the polls."

Pausing briefly, a mischievous smile curled the corners of her mouth.

"We can exploit this!"

Simultaneously, Lumian mirrored her grin.

"Isn't it like stumbling upon a soft pillow just when you're sleepy? Indeed, delving into politics is a treacherous affair."

Franca turned her head, amusement twinkling in her eyes as she glanced at Lumian.

"Your sister must have imparted many hometown sayings to you. How do you plan on operating this thing?"

Lumian fell silent for a moment before speaking again.

"If I were an Actor, the problem would be simple. Nonetheless, I still possess those glasses."

Franca nodded, satisfied with his response.

"This operation requires both a surprise attack and an assassination. The importance of the assassination must outweigh that of the surprise attack to minimize a Heretic Spellmaster's

advantage on their home turf."
After some deliberation, the two of them moved away from 126 Avenue du Marché, positioning themselves in a shadowy spot near the district's parliamentary election commission.
The day's voting had concluded, and the election commission staff toiled diligently, counting the votes and providing real-time updates. Countless reporters from various newspapers gathered there, eager to acquire firsthand data.
If all went according to plan, Hugues Artois would secure more than half of the registered votes tonight, enabling him to declare his election victory.
As time ticked by, the night grew darker. Suddenly, Franca nudged Lumian and pointed towards a figure exiting the election commission.
"That's the guy from the Poison Spur Mob."
The person appeared to be almost thirty, boasting black hair, brown eyes, and a narrow face. He sported a blue-and-white striped shirt, a light brown jacket, and a thick gold necklace.
Lumian offered a subtle nod and departed from his hiding place, adopting an air of urgency as he approached the man.
He pulled his dark cap down low, obscuring his distinct blond-and-black hair.
Upon noticing someone drawing nearer, the Poison Spur Mob member cautiously altered his path.
At that moment, Lumian took a diagonal stride forward, positioning himself in front of the individual. He smiled and greeted, "Long time no see. How have you been faring within the Poison Spur Mob?"
The man was caught off guard. Utilizing the illumination from the gas street lamps, he scrutinized Lumian's face.
Seizing the opportunity, Lumian lunged forward, gripping the other person's neck and pulling them into an embrace.
Simultaneously, Lumian pushed the metal canister closer to the target's nose with his left hand.
He had already unscrewed the lid, but he kept his finger pressed against the opening, controlling the gas release.
The Poison Spur Mob member struggled desperately, but Lumian's palm covered his mouth and nose, silencing any outcry. His punches and kicks were easily deflected—either his neck was constricted or his back was pinned down by an elbow. His head remained ensconced in the other person's grasp, nestled against their chest. In his anxious state, it was difficult for him to strike his foe's vulnerable points, and Lumian endured the onslaught.
After a few seconds, the man's resistance began to wane. Passersby

cast fleeting glances at him before walking away without detecting anything amiss.
Within moments, the man in Lumian's arms lost consciousness.
Supporting his "intoxicated" companion, Lumian sealed the bottle once more with his finger.
They arrived at a deserted alley barricaded from public access, where Lumian abandoned his target and screwed the metal canister shut.
"You're very reckless." Franca emerged from the shadows beside him. "Only in Trier can you get away with this. Anywhere else, someone would have raised a loud alarm."
"I reserve these actions solely for Trier," Lumian replied, crouching down to strip the Poison Spur Mob member of his attire and necklace. He bound his hands and feet with a rope he had brought along.
Having completed the task, Lumian administered some truth serum to his captive before reviving him with the Mysticism Smelling Salts.
Three consecutive sneezes followed. The Poison Spur Mob member opened his eyes and exclaimed in horror, "Who are you? What do you want?"
Lumian removed his cap and crouched in front of the target, wearing a smile. He asked, "Can't you recognize me?"
Under the crimson moonlight, the Poison Spur Mob member glimpsed the golden-black hair and a vaguely familiar face.
His teeth chattered.
"C-Ciel!"
"I have something to ask you. If you refuse to answer or choose to deceive me, you know the consequences," Lumian said with a smile.
His cold, merciless, and unhinged reputation preceded him within the Poison Spur Mob. The man was so terrified that his heart seemed ready to leap out of his throat.
"I'll talk, I'll talk!"
Unfazed, Lumian inquired, "Where were you planning to go just now?"
"To the Boss's place to report the election's polling situation. Monsieur Hugues Artois has secured nearly half the votes. He's just a little shy..." Not only did the man answer Lumian's question, but he also provided additional information.
Lumian nodded contentedly and proceeded to inquire about the specific details the Poison Spur Mob member had previously relayed to "Black Scorpion" Roger.
This encompassed his demeanor towards the staff, his manner of

addressing "Black Scorpion" Roger, his positioning, and his tone.
Having meticulously memorized the details, Lumian employed the sedative once more to render the Poison Spur Mob member unconscious.
Without delay, he changed into the other person's attire, retrieved his Mystery Prying Glasses, and perched them upon his nose.
This time, underground, he beheld rats, insects, and serpents, but a charred building and a blurred face behind a glass window also materialized.
The face possessed unusually vacant eyes.
Lumian's mind momentarily spun into disarray. Frowning, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and retrieved a collection of cosmetics.
Assisted by the crimson moonlight and the small torch held by Franca, he meticulously applied various substances to his face, utilizing the makeup mirror his companion carried.
Around ten minutes later, his countenance grew gaunter and began to assume the likeness of the Poison Spur Mob member.
His skill in makeup fell short of fully replicating the other person's appearance, but the inherent effect of the Mystery Prying Glasses would convince anyone who glimpsed his face that he was the individual named Alsai.
Smack!
Lumian snapped the makeup mirror shut, daring not to gaze upon his reflection once more.
As Franca stowed away her belongings, she had Lumian turn his back to her.
She feared that she, too, might mistake her companion for a member of the Poison Spur Mob, thereby hindering their subsequent collaboration.
Franca examined Lumian's hair color and retrieved the disguise props she had acquired from Rentas.
"Hair and eye color are the most noticeable flaws. First, use this black hair dye, then wear these brown contact lenses.
"Damn it, anything is possible in the realm of mysticism. Who would have thought that in this day and age, Actors could create the illusion of cosmetic contacts? Although the materials are different and they don't improve vision, they can indeed alter the color of one's irises. Otherwise, Rentas wouldn't have been able to pass as Ive or you. It defies scientific explanation, but it's utterly mystical!"
Lumian paid no mind to Franca's musings and took the mysticism hair dye, which could be washed away with a special lotion. Under her guidance, he transformed his golden and black hair into a

solid black hue.
Once he donned the brown contact lenses, Franca seized the opportunity to discuss the specifics of their forthcoming assault.
The two of them swiftly outlined a rough plan, but they refrained from delving into every detail. Firstly, time was limited, and secondly, they had to anticipate numerous unforeseen circumstances at the scene. It was impossible to account for every possibility, so they could only adapt and make decisions based on the main concept.
Franca produced a coin pouch.
It was a fist-sized bag made of grayish-white cloth, filled with gold, silver, and copper coins.
Franca rummaged in her bag and retrieved an iron-colored ring with a thick band and slender spikes on its surface.
"This is one of my mystical items, the Ring of Punishment," she explained to Lumian. "It serves a single purpose. It can pierce a target's Spirit Body within a five-meter range, causing excruciating pain and rendering them temporarily unconscious. For Low- and Mid-Sequence Beyonders, there are very few Beyonder powers capable of bypassing defense and directly attacking a Spirit Body. This is one of them."
Franca paused momentarily before continuing, "Wearing it for an extended period will make you irritable, bloodthirsty, cruel, and impulsive. If you use it more than three times in an hour, it will cause your personality to undergo mutation. If you remove it, you will suffer indiscriminate Psychic Piercing damage once you enter a five-meter radius. To seal it, you need to place it amidst a pile of valuable metal coins."
Currently, Franca wore the ring, ensuring neither she nor Lumian fell victim to its effects.
She handed the Ring of Punishment to Lumian.
As soon as Lumian slipped the ring onto his right middle finger, he experienced overwhelming frustration.
Collecting himself, he donned black gloves, left the alley, and jogged towards 126 Avenue du Marché.

Chapter 225: Exposed

On 126 Avenue du Marché in Lumian, concealed as Alsai, a member of the Poison Spur Mob, pressed the doorbell of the three-story building with a garden out back.

Amidst the pleasant chimes, the valet, who had previously ushered Louis Lund inside, swung open the wooden door.

Seeing Alsai's face beaming with joy, he returned the smile.

"Have the voting results for today been announced?"

"You bet!" Lumian concealed his voice with feigned delight. "Monsieur Hugues Artois will be the new member of parliament by noon tomorrow!"

The valet had long been a believer in the Great Mother, and he had been promised a reward of becoming a Villain after the election. Hearing this news delighted him, and he led Lumian straight to the living room.

In the living room, "Black Scorpion" Roger, now wearing aqua-blue silk pajamas, lounged on a divan. He addressed "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, nestled beside him while he playfully squeezed her buttocks, and "Baldy" Harman, who paced around the room.

"Hold on tight. It all comes to an end tomorrow night.

"No matter what happens in the next 24 hours, we can't leave this place!"

Is that so? Are you willing to stay here even if there's a fire, explosion, or earthquake? Lumian criticized silently. He shook off the valet and swiftly approached.

"Boss, I have good news!"

"Black Scorpion" Roger's excitement was palpable. He forgot to scrutinize his subordinates' movements, voices, and appearance. His eyes sparkled as he inquired, "Has Monsieur Hugues Artois won the election?"

"Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina turned their gaze toward Lumian as well.

At that moment, Lumian had closed the gap between him and "Black Scorpion" Roger, standing just three meters away from the divan and the glass coffee table before it.

He exclaimed with excitement, "He's only 2,000 votes away from securing a majority!"

"Black Scorpion" Roger felt a tinge of disappointment, but his happiness prevailed.

He nodded and proclaimed, "Very good..."

Before he could even complete his sentence, Lumian's hand caught his attention.

He was wearing a pair of black gloves.
Alsai didn't have such a habit!
At that moment, two blinding beams shot out from Lumian's eyes —like silent bullets and swift lightning bolts.
With a snap, "Black Scorpion" Roger felt the imaginary sound of his Spirit Body shattering, sending waves of excruciating pain through him. He cried out tragically, clutching his head in agony.
In his state of distress, he completely forgot to activate the protective enchantment that usually shrouded the master bedroom and living room.
The sudden twist of events, their origin unknown, left "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina and "Baldy" Harman bewildered, struggling to comprehend the situation. Their responses were purely instinctive.
One of them stood tall, assuming a defensive stance against the suspicious Alsai, while the other sprinted towards their boss, shielding his flank.
Lumian seized this golden opportunity. Drawing his weapon, Fallen Mercury, he lunged at "Black Scorpion" Roger, who huddled on the couch.
Witnessing the attack, "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina intercepted with her right elbow, disregarding the harm that would befall her. Her intention was to aid "Black Scorpion" Roger in fending off the strike.
In her other hand, she grabbed the nearby axe, attempting to swing it at Alsai.
Suddenly, a figure dressed in black robes, their face concealed beneath a hood, materialized behind her.
Franca!
Franca had skillfully employed Invisibility to trail Lumian all the way to this location. Her primary target was "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, the one providing protection to "Black Scorpion" Roger.
She refrained from directly assassinating "Black Scorpion" Roger, fearing that a fatal blow jeopardizing his life would activate the "magic circle" with its substitution effect.
The hidden blade, wreathed in black flames, darted forth alongside Franca's full-force strike. It pierced through Castina's back, finding its mark in her heart.
Castina's brown eyes widened, her face contorted with disbelief, pain, and despair.
Despite the injury, she continued to block for "Black Scorpion" Roger, but her strength had already abandoned her.
Lumian's arm seemed to possess no bones. With fluid motion, he

flicked his joints and swung his forearm, evading Castina's feeble attempt to obstruct him. The pewter-black dirk soared, aiming straight for the leader of the Poison Spur Mob.
Fallen Mercury's tip pierced through the aqua-blue pajamas, puncturing the skin over "Black Scorpion" Roger's ribs.
Crimson blood rapidly welled up, and amidst the pain of the Psychic Piercing somewhat subsiding, "Black Scorpion" Roger snapped back to reality.
He emitted an unnaturally enraged shriek, and blurry faces, some bluish-white, materialized on the living room's floor, ceiling, and walls. Most were ordinary people, a handful being children, their visages twisted with agony.
As the Undying Lands materialized, "Black Scorpion" Roger, nearly impaled by Fallen Mercury, vanished from Lumian's sight, leaving behind the pewter-black dirk stained with blood.
Crash! "Baldy" Harman toppled the coffee table and lunged towards Lumian, who had just collapsed onto the sofa.
Lumian hastily raised his hand, but his body wavered, and he slumped to the ground.
In midair, his eyes caught a glimpse of "Baldy" Harman's form, followed by lighting up with two beams of light resembling lightning.
Harman, on the verge of launching a close combat assault, experienced an anguish that penetrated the depths of his soul, forcing an involuntary scream to escape his lips.
His body froze, tilting backward. Franca, fresh from dispatching "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, brandished a classic brass revolver in her right hand.
She aimed it at Harman's bald head and swiftly pulled the trigger.
With a resounding bang, an obsidian bullet pierced Harman's gleaming scalp, causing it to explode like a watermelon. A spray of red and white erupted in all directions.
"Black Scorpion" Roger, having just manifested from the visage of an undead on the adjacent wall, witnessed the scene and emitted an unusually resentful and outraged howl.
Alongside this outcry, his eyes darkened, as though a fervent life burned within.
The blood that drenched the living room and the two lifeless bodies churned, surging towards "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina as if infused with a life force. The two victims adorned a crimson shroud, rising unsteadily to their feet.
The blood upon Fallen Mercury ignited, casting forth a radiant glow akin to the warmth of spring's sun.
"Black Scorpion" Roger vividly recalled Margot's demise, prompting

his initial response to rid the evil dirk of the blood it bore and retaliate against the assailant, averting an inexplicable demise in battle.
His second response was to swiftly conclude the conflict and seek aid from Lady Moon. Even the Rebirth ritual proved incapable of absolving the influence of Ciel's wicked dirk. The efficacy of solely burning the blood remained uncertain.
Indeed, he had recognized the assailant as that wretched lunatic, Ciel, through the pewter-black malevolent blade.
Cursed Ciel!
The radiant flames upon Fallen Mercury blazed along the blade, reaching towards Lumian's fingertips. Without hesitation, Lumian cast aside the malevolent pewter-black dirk, letting it fall upon the ground amidst the contorted visages.
At this point, Fallen Mercury was no longer required.
The pewter-black dirk, which facilitated the exchange of destinies, merely utilized blood as a conduit; it did not depend on it. Once the fate officially entered the exchange process, the presence of blood would no longer influence subsequent developments.
As Lumian retrieved Fallen Mercury, the exchange of fates commenced.
He made no deliberate choices, allowing Fallen Mercury to exercise its own discretion.
Lumian braced his left hand against the pallid, indistinct faces strewn upon the ground. With the resilience bestowed by the Alms Monk, he rebounded onto the divan amidst the bone-chilling cold and rigidity.
No longer did the horrifying countenances of the undead pervade this space—only "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, their original appearances concealed beneath the flowing cascade of blood.
Simultaneously, the two lifeless bodies extended their arms and lunged at Lumian, seeking to ensnare him in their clutches.
Meanwhile, Franca leapt nimbly, alighting upon a chair with an air of weightlessness.
Unbeknownst to all, a thick frost had descended from the pallid-white or bluish-white ground, solidifying into a translucent sheen of ice.
This restrained the undead countenances, constraining their movements.
Almost concurrently, Franca's left hand, pressed against the hidden blade, tightened its grip, causing black flames to erupt within "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina's form, consuming her from within.

The lingering spirit of the blood-colored corpse emitted an ethereal crackling sound as its mutated body melted akin to a dripping candle, splashing upon the ground.
"Black Scorpion" Roger, relying upon the characteristic of the Undying Lands to shift locations, emitted yet another shrill cry.
A layer of black flames enkindled upon Franca's person.
In contrast to her own black flames, the black flames conjured by the Heretic Spellmaster exuded an overt malevolence, as if they consumed the life force and vitality of all who stood witness.
With a resounding crack, Franca's figure shattered, leaving behind naught but irregular shards of mirror.
Upon the icy veneer upon the ground, the Witch's form swiftly coalesced and leaped forth.
She had taken the initiative to create frost and freeze the ground not for restricting the movements of "Black Scorpion" Roger. Firstly, she sought to diminish the influence of the deceased spirits, and secondly, she aimed to gather ample materials for the Mirror Substitution.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
Devoid of the pincer attack from "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, Lumian deftly parried head-on, successfully evading the bloodied Harman. Springing onto the overturned coffee table, he withdrew his revolver and unleashed a volley of shots towards "Black Scorpion" Roger upon the wall. Concurrently, he produced the drawing depicting the peculiar sun.
He held no concern that his assault upon the target would disrupt the exchange of fates. For he was neither the wielder of Fallen Mercury, nor did he grasp its hilt.
The yellow bullets struck the wall with force, yet "Black Scorpion" Roger had already diminished into a wan, distorted, transparent countenance, vanishing from Lumian and Franca's sight.

Chapter 226: Sculpture

Lumian's left hand trembled, revealing the sun pattern that emitted a colorful glow.

The living room, once chilly, suddenly warmed up, but the frost on the ground remained stubbornly frozen. Only the pale, distorted faces turned away, unable to bear witness to what was about to unfold.

Harman, decapitated and drenched in blood, charged at Lumian, heedless of the revolver pointed his way, driven by a sinister desire to "embrace" his intended victim by force.

The drawing of the sun caused his body to tremble, and blood dripped from him onto the ground.

Instinctively, Lumian knew he couldn't engage in a direct confrontation with this "corpse." He used his light brown jacket to shield himself, pushing back against Harman's relentless assault.

The jacket quickly turned blood-red, showing signs of wear.

At that moment, "Black Scorpion" Roger had been absent for a couple of seconds, and Franca finally found an opportunity to act.

A dense black flame materialized in her palm, which she hurled at the zombified Harman.

The black flames struck the blood-stained corpse with the force of a cannonball, causing it to burst into silent flames that ignited the hidden spirituality within the blood and remains.

Harman began to melt, much like Castina, resembling a candle tossed in a blazing fire.

Just then, "Black Scorpion" Roger emerged from a corner, his face pale, cradling a sculpture of equal height in his arms.

The sculpture portrayed a woman with gentle features, her long dress intricately detailed and lifelike.

After exerting great effort to place the sculpture on the ground, Roger melded with the writhing, distorted faces around him, evading Lumian's shots and Franca's black flames with impeccable timing.

In the next instant, he reappeared beneath the ceiling chandelier, cursing rapidly.

"You're dead meat!"

"I'll turn you into fertilizer!"

"Son of a bitch, daring to intrude upon my Undying Lands!"

"I'll take every last one of your lives!"

"I want you to have 20 children!"

"Black Scorpion" Roger constantly changed positions as he spat out these words. He swiftly moved and leaped, skillfully dodging Lumian's unfolded drawing and Franca's array of witchcraft spells,

primarily comprised of black flames and frost.
Each word, seemingly stemming from Intisian, pierced Lumian and Franca's minds like an arrow. They felt dizzy and their blood resonated with the onslaught.
In the corner, the female sculpture activated, its surface blazing with brilliant flames.
Lumian's head throbbed as if struck by an ethereal hammer. Bright red blood streamed uncontrollably from his nostrils.
Almost simultaneously, Franca, perched on the sofa, clenched her left hand, conjuring black flames that ignited from Lumian's nose. She left Roger no opportunity to counteract.
Franca herself endured similar injuries. She suspected that "Black Scorpion" Roger was employing a curse-like incantation. Moreover, the female sculpture's augmentation had greatly fortified his physical and spiritual presence. Franca couldn't endure more than a few uttered words.
As "Black Scorpion" Roger had left the sculpture unprotected, Franca believed that a direct attack might result in even more dreadful consequences, likely taking the form of a curse.
Suppressing her boiling blood, dizziness, and bodily pain, she raised her brass revolver and fired at "Black Scorpion" Roger, seizing the chance to leap towards the sculpture.
The iron-black bullet shattered a contorted face, leaving marks on the wall, but it failed to harm Roger.
Once Franca landed, she swiftly circled around the sculpture. She didn't squeeze the trigger of her brass revolver again, nor did she thrust with her blade. While evading the slender figures summoned by "Black Scorpion" Roger, she encased the sculpture in layers of frost.
Meanwhile, Lumian, who had been the focal point of Roger's attention, found himself in imminent peril.
A piercing cry resounded as illusory black flames kindled upon Lumian's body.
It drained his life force with alarming speed, causing his physical strength to wane.
Without hesitation, Lumian discarded the peculiar sun drawing and lunged towards the sofa, reaching into his pocket with his left hand.
Beside the overturned coffee table, "Black Scorpion" Roger emerged from the icy seal, brandishing a pitch-black, malevolent scythe that stood half the height of a man. He cleaved through the furniture before him, rending it in two.
Lumian alighted on the sofa, his left hand withdrawing from his pocket, clutching a slender and slightly pale finger.

In the face of Roger's scythe, Lumian, already weakened, barely managed to evade the strike by shifting his body.
Simultaneously, he tossed the severed finger into the air.
It was Mr. K's finger!
Amidst the sound of tearing leather and fabric, the divan was sundered by the wicked scythe. The pale-white finger expanded and detonated like a bomb.
It metamorphosed into a shower of flesh and blood droplets that cascaded onto Lumian, extinguishing the fading black flames.
The flesh absorbed the surrounding blood and dissolved corpses, swiftly coalescing and draping Lumian in a cloak of blood-red hue.
The profound weakness that had plagued Lumian dissipated. He sprang up, launching a counteroffensive against "Black Scorpion" Roger.
Witnessing this, Roger avoided a direct confrontation. He retreated into the fractured ice and merged with one of the distorted faces.
Franca, who had already encased the sculpture in frost, suddenly felt an intense chill.
The restless spirits in the living room seemed incensed. They surged from all directions, extending their arms and gaping mouths, enveloping Franca.
With a resounding crack, yet another mirror shattered.
Franca's form materialized on the other side of the ice. She raised her hand, causing black flames to surge around the sculpture, setting ablaze the indistinct souls and blood-hued shadows.
"Black Scorpion" Roger peered out from a nearby wall and unleashed another curse, "Damn bitch!"
As he weakened his targets, he swiftly shifted positions with the aid of the tormented faces. Sometimes, he targeted Lumian, and other times, he assailed Franca. He relied on the power of the Undying Lands and the sculpture to single-handedly suppress the two foes.
At intervals, vile black flames ignited over Lumian's form, sapping his life force and diminishing his strength. Yet, each time, they were counteracted by the robe forged from flesh and blood. Franca evaded the combined assaults of Evil Word, Blood Spirit, Weak Black Flame, and Life Burning time and again, employing the technique of Mirror Substitution.
Time slipped away swiftly. Noticing that Ciel's robe of flesh and blood teetered on the brink of disintegration, while the mirror and ice that Franca had brought with her neared depletion, "Black Scorpion" Roger poked his head through the ceiling, a malicious chuckle escaping his lips.
"You fools!

"Do you truly believe you can withstand the might of the Undying Lands?
"I fear no consequence, even if the entire leadership of the Savoie Mob were to enter this domain!
"Go to hell!"
His cutting words pierced Lumian and Franca's ears and minds, causing their bodies to tremble as if they could bear no more.
Observing this, "Black Scorpion" Roger, who had already shifted to the adjacent wall, revealed a sinister smile, brimming with anticipation.
Suddenly, his vision darkened, and a surge of intense emotions overwhelmed his heart.
Disbelief, shock, confusion, and panic.
In the subsequent moment, he lost consciousness.
Thud!
The boss of the Poison Spur Mob materialized from the wall, collapsed onto the floor, and slipped into unconsciousness.
The fate exchange had finally concluded, as Fallen Mercury swapped the unconscious fate of the dying tramp with "Black Scorpion" Roger's!
It happened swiftly, much faster than the exchange involving Margot.
This was because the tramp was an ordinary person, and when Fallen Mercury selected "Black Scorpion" Roger's fate, it chose the least significant one, unrelated to any Beyonder matters.
Lumian's gaze fixated on "Black Scorpion" Roger, clad in aqua-blue pajamas. Supported by his blood-colored robe, Lumian traversed the transparent and distorted faces, enduring the bone-chilling cold and stiffness. Finally, he reached his motionless target. Retrieving the metal canister containing the sedative, Lumian unscrewed the cap and squatted down.
He directed the sedative obtained from Rentas toward "Black Scorpion" Roger's nose, gently fanning the gas with his hand, ensuring its entry into the enemy's breath.
With that done, Lumian lifted "Black Scorpion" Roger and made his way out of the living room, guarded by Franca.
The valets and maids had long since fled.
As "Black Scorpion" Roger departed the living room, the bluish-white faces swiftly faded away, and everything returned to normal.
Witnessing this, Lumian dropped the Poison Spur Mob leader to the ground and aimed his revolver at the man's head.
After a few seconds of contemplation, Lumian pulled the trigger calmly and silently.

Two shots rang out, transforming "Black Scorpion" Roger's head into a burst watermelon, splattering blood in every direction.
He met his demise while in a coma.
Franca glanced at Lumian, still aiming at "Black Scorpion" Roger, and asked calmly,
"How is it? Have you vented all your frustrations?"
If it weren't for Franca's desire to assist Lumian, she would have considered reporting "Black Scorpion" Roger and his associates for their belief in the Great Mother.
Lumian fell silent for a moment, his lips curling into a smile.
"No.
"It merely resolved one hidden danger."
Franca let out a soft sigh.
"In my homeland, we say that to cure a heart's ailment, the remedy must come from within. But if you don't do it right, no matter how much you try, it's futile.
"Well, I'll quickly communicate with the spirit, and let's strive to depart this place within three minutes. Hurry and seize the spoils."
"Alright," Lumian responded, as the remaining bloodstained garments on his body disintegrated, staining the ground red.
That's it? Lumian couldn't help but furrow his brow.
It wasn't that Mr. K's finger lacked strength. On the contrary, without it, Lumian would have been too feeble to resist and would have required Franca's aid.
However, its performance fell short if made to face the formidable evil spirit, Susanna Mattise. Lumian couldn't help but feel disappointed and perplexed.
As these thoughts raced through his mind, he headed toward the living room, scanning his surroundings for valuable items.
Suddenly, he noticed a figure cloaked in a large hood and black robe standing quietly on the staircase.
Mr. K!
Lumian's pupils dilated, but in an instant, Mr. K vanished into the shadows.

Chapter 227: Agent

Did the finger serve as a signal? How did Mr. K manage to arrive so swiftly? Or was he perhaps observing me from nearby? Lumian felt a surge of tension, his weariness from the battle fading considerably.

This revelation granted him a fresh understanding of Mr. K's power, fueling his fear.

Lumian averted his gaze and retrieved Fallen Mercury,

its blade tarnished by the scorching and decay. He couldn't help but wonder if it would endure until the year's end.

After securing Fallen Mercury, Lumian proceeded to examine the two corpses that had mostly disintegrated under the deluge of blood.

The victims displayed clear signs of petrification, rendering them motionless on the ground, and their ghastly appearance would haunt anyone who laid eyes on them for years to come.

The clothing and personal effects of the deceased suffered extensive corrosion, including Harman's poisoned dirk and Castina's cherished axe.

Among the few items that remained relatively unscathed were several specially crafted canisters with an iron hue, emitting a flickering metallic sheen. Although they bore noticeable signs of corrosion on their surfaces, the liquid contents remained unaffected.

Lumian scrutinized the canisters and discerned four distinct types, distinguished by etched patterns: a tree, a bear-like face, a spring fountain, and a scorpion.

Harman and Castina had each carried one, leaving a total of eight canisters.

Gathering them up, Lumian approached the peculiar scythe recently wielded by "Black Scorpion" Roger. It exuded an ominous aura, its pitch-black blade sharp and menacing. It wasn't as compact as a wheat-harvesting scythe, nor as colossal as a giant weapon. It lacked the capacity to shock onlookers and measured only half the height of an average person.

The moment Lumian's black-gloved hand touched the scythe, he sensed an ethereal spike extending from it, piercing into his flesh and gradually siphoning his life force. It felt chilling and merciless.

Swiftly retracting his hand, Lumian realized that his life was no longer ebbing away slowly.

Is it a mystical artifact or a Beyonder weapon akin to Fallen Mercury... *How can I remove it safely?* Lumian delved into deep

contemplation.
Just then, Franca finished her preparations and commenced spirit channeling.
Lumian returned to "Black Scorpion" Roger's corpse, carrying the eight canisters, and communicated with Franca through the wall of spirituality, saying, "Inquire about the purpose of these objects and how to transport the scythe."
Franca nodded and directed her gaze toward Roger's face, which materialized on the mirrored surface.
"What effects do these canisters on Harman and Castina have? How can I identify them?"
Roger, his face pale and bewildered, replied, "The tree-patterned one is Bark Agent. It toughens your skin and muscles, rendering them as resilient as trees.
"The bear-faced pattern is Berserk Agent. It grants you extraordinary strength when unleashed.
"The spring fountain pattern represents Healing Agent. It mends most external wounds, alleviates severe injuries, and eliminates minor ailments.
"The scorpion pattern is 'Scorpion Poison.' It is primarily used on weapons and induces arrhythmia and respiratory paralysis, ultimately leading to death."
Quite useful indeed... Franca silently praised.
Her Hidden Blade would greatly benefit from a canister of Scorpion Poison.
Franca persisted with her questioning.
"How do you usually transport that scythe?"
"In my study, there's a large wooden box. Put it inside quickly, and you can take it away," replied Roger, his face pale and devoid of emotion.
Franca pressed further, "Is the scythe a mystical object or a Beyonder weapon? What are its abilities?"
"It's called Harvest Sacrifice. It's a weapon infused with a blessed aura and possesses the quality of sharpness. Once it inflicts a wound on the target, and that wound becomes tainted with the corresponding blood, it can continuously drain the life force of the other party," Roger described the scythe in a dazed manner.
Seizing the opportunity, Franca redirected the conversation to more crucial matters.
"Have you encountered Madame Moon? How do you maintain contact with her?"
Roger's pale face contorted with pain.
"I met Madame Moon in the wilderness. Well, now she's Lady Moon. She sat in a peculiar carriage pulled by two demons,

wearing a veil that made her appear holy and maternal to me.
"Usually, she seeks me out and commands me to venture into the wilderness abruptly.
"She gave me a green seed to place inside the statue's abdominal cavity. If I face danger, I can use it to urgently contact her.
"But there's no need for the seed now. By reciting her full honorific name, I can elicit her response."
She can respond to an honorific name? That's quite advanced... Franca refrained from inquiring about Lady Moon's honorific name, fearing that the other party might detect her intention.
Although she could already surmise the answer, she asked out of curiosity, "Why didn't you seek Lady Moon's assistance earlier?"
Roger replied, his gaze vacant, "I can win."
You clung to your delusion until the very end, didn't you? Franca clicked her tongue and remarked, "Why are you supporting Hugues Artois?"
"Lady Moon instructed us to aid in his election," Roger replied with a blank expression. "She claimed that Hugues Artois is an open-minded individual."
Open-minded... *What does that mean?* Franca struggled to comprehend this assessment.
As Franca channeled "Black Scorpion" Roger, Lumian didn't linger by her side. Instead, he ventured into the study, assuming Alsai's appearance, and began sifting through valuable items.
Armed with a short wire, he attempted to unlock the safe door, but his efforts proved futile.
Within the study, he discovered a suitable wooden box for housing the sinister scythe. Carrying it, he descended the stairs to the open-door basement.
The area appeared tidy, except for a stone platform suspected of holding the statue, devoid of any other objects.
Employing his keen observation skills as a Hunter, Lumian scoured the vicinity and uncovered a concealed door.
With a grating sound, he pushed open the secret passage and revealed a corridor beyond. On either side of the corridor stood prison cells enclosed by iron bars. Dozens, if not hundreds, of people were crammed inside. Most appeared destitute, but among them were well-dressed gentlemen, ladies, and seemingly lost children.
In that moment, nearly a third of the captives lay lifeless on the floor, their skin shriveled and lacking vitality. They resembled skeletons more than human beings.
They no longer drew breath, and they had lost control of their bodily functions. The stench permeated the private prison.

Lumian's gaze swept over the trembling individuals, and he noticed numerous sinister and peculiar symbols etched upon the ground, the wall behind them, and the iron fence in front.
No wonder a Heretic Spellmaster wields such formidable power on their home turf... Lumian reached a realization.
Not only did they possess the backing of a "magic circle" teeming with deceased souls, but they could also extract the life force of others at will to replenish their own!
Balancing the wooden box with one arm, Lumian retrieved his revolver, pressed it against the door of a cell, and pulled the trigger.
With a resounding bang, the iron lock shattered and clattered to the ground.
After reloading, Lumian paid little attention to the captives. He progressed methodically, obliterating the iron locks of the remaining cells.
Then, with the revolver holstered under his armpit, he turned and departed, leaving behind a bewildered and numbed group of survivors.
When Lumian returned to the ground floor, Franca had just concluded the spirit channeling and dispelled the spiritual barrier.
"Did you discover anything?" Franca inquired casually.
Lumian gestured toward the wooden box nestled under his left arm.
"It should suffice for storing the scythe. I couldn't access the safe. It's possible that the servants fled to the second floor or the garden at the back. I didn't encounter them."
"Don't concern yourself with them. As followers of an evil deity, they will meet a swift demise once their protection wanes. Furthermore, we have disguised ourselves adequately to avoid recognition," Franca affirmed with a nod. "Pack up Harvest Sacrifice. We shall depart now. Oh, by the way, the scythe is called Harvest Sacrifice."
Before long, Lumian returned to "Black Scorpion" Roger's lifeless body with the scythe in hand, presenting the wooden box to Franca.
Then, he squatted down, tore off a section of his pajamas, crumpled it into a ball, and stained it with blood.
Curious, Franca inquired, "What are you doing?"
Lumian remained focused, his gaze fixed on the task at hand, and succinctly replied, "Providing a hint to the official Beyonders."
With the blood-stained cloth in hand, Lumian made his way back to the living room. Beside the serene female statue, he messily inscribed words in Intisian: "Great Mother."

Having completed the task, Lumian discarded the cloth bundle and headed towards the door.
Why does it seem so provocative... Franca sighed and turned around.
Behind her, dark flames materialized and ascended, consuming the traces left by both of them and the lingering Spirit Bodies of the deceased.
Shortly after, Franca scattered shimmering powder and recited the incantation of invisibility. She disappeared from the foyer, clutching the wooden box.
Lumian pushed open the door and confidently stepped out onto 126 Avenue du Marché.
He left the door ajar, allowing the scene within to be exposed to passersby.
Under the yellowish glow of the gas wall lamps, a lifeless body lay in the foyer, surrounded by blood.
Lumian crossed Avenue du Marché, constantly altering his course, until he reached the alley where he had changed his clothes and assumed his disguise.
He wiped his face clean and donned his original attire, no longer emanating the aura of Alsai.
In the next moment, Franca transformed into her hooded figure, draped in black robes. She retrieved the Ring of Punishment from Lumian and returned it to her coin bag.
The Witch glanced at the unconscious Poison Spur Mob member, Alsai, and said to Lumian, who was about to depart, "Aren't you going to take care of him?
"He knows Ciel knocked him out, and the person who killed 'Black Scorpion' Roger posed as him."
Lumian remained silent. He drew his revolver, partially turned, and fired at Alsai, clad in a blue-and-white striped shirt.
Two gunshots rang out as the Poison Spur Mob member, trusted by "Black Scorpion" Roger, was struck in the chest and met his demise.
Observing Lumian's nonchalant demeanor, Franca shook her head inwardly and proceeded to deal with the remaining Spirit Body and traces in the alley.
Then, she concealed herself once more and departed alongside Lumian. He scaled the outer wall and returned to the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.
After using a special lotion from Rentas to remove the excess black dye from his hair and transforming back into Ciel Dubois, Lumian, Franca smiled and inquired, "Do you want to keep this scythe? If not, I'll sell it and we'll split the proceeds evenly.

"Your Provoker potion should be almost fully digested. You'll need to gather funds and ingredients for your advancement."

Chapter 228: Sudden Digestion

Upon Franca's mention of advancement, Lumian felt a sudden urge to make preparations.

It wasn't that he didn't aspire to become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac and master mysticism techniques, but the Hunter and Provoker potion formulas were bestowed upon him by Madam Magician, making them easily obtainable and reducing the sense of urgency. His plan was to wait until the Provoker potion had fully digested before writing a letter to Madam Magician, inquiring about the price for obtaining everything necessary for his advancement.

More importantly, Lumian knew that Madam Magician possessed a Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.

But now that he thought about it, he felt that he had to make additional preparations.

It occurred to him that Madam Magician might not be associated with the Hunter pathway, which meant she might not possess the Pyromaniac potion formula. Furthermore, she could have already given the Beyonder characteristic to someone else. Lumian couldn't be the only one with the Minor Arcana card, and it was unlikely that they all belonged to different pathways.

While Madam Magician's level and abilities made it relatively easy for her to acquire the Pyromaniac potion formula and its main ingredient, she might be unwilling or face unforeseen delays.

Lost in thought, Lumian glanced at the wooden box resting on Franca's lap and hesitated before suggesting, "Let's sell it."

The evil scythe possessed an uncanny sharpness and the ability to drain an enemy's life through blood, perfectly suited to Lumian's close-quarters combat style. However, it proved highly inconvenient to carry and conceal due to its usage restrictions. Most of the time, Lumian could only store it at Salle de Bal Brise or Auberge du Coq Doré, relying on it when attacked. Alternatively, he could draw it in advance and hide it in the cover of night shadows for offensive purposes.

If Lumian wished to have it with him at all times, his only solution was to acquire a cello case and carry it on his back.

Yet, for a mobster leader, this would raise suspicions.

In fact, if Franca hadn't brought up the topic of preparing for his advancement, Lumian would have deemed his current stash of 4,000 verl d'or far from sufficient. He needed to acquire more funds. Keeping the evil scythe, known as Harvest Sacrifice, wasn't a problem as it could still prove useful in certain situations. If necessary, Lumian could use the Mystery Prying Glasses to disguise himself as a musician, carrying the cello on his back to

assassinate his intended target.
Franca sighed in response.
"I suppose selling it is our only option. It's actually quite good, but it doesn't suit my combat style."
She then gestured towards Lumian's waist.
"How about we each get a canister?"
To be honest, Franca wasn't particularly interested in the Berserk Agent and the Bark Agent. She only desired the Scorpion Poison and the Healing Agent. However, considering that Lumian also required poison for his weapons and healing capabilities, she opted for a fair solution.
"Alright," Lumian agreed.
...
In the dead of the night, outside 126 Avenue du Marché:
A group of police officers, dressed in black uniforms, formed a barricade to keep pedestrians away from the building behind them.
Within the house, Angoulême de François with his blond hair, eyebrows, and beard, stood before a delicate female sculpture. His gaze fixed upon the blood-red words adorning the wall.
Donning a row of golden buttons on his chest, he remained silent, emanating an overwhelming sense of oppression that affected both the surrounding Purifiers and police officers.
After a moment, the Purifier of Southern Continent descent emerged from the basement and approached Angoulême. In hushed tones, he spoke, "Deacon, we have found clear signs of sacrificial rituals to an evil god beneath us. There are deceased individuals who were used as living sacrifices."
"The prison cells have been unlocked, and some of the abductees managed to escape. Those who remain informed me that 'Black Scorpion' Roger did indeed employ sorcery."
Angoulême listened impassively, scanning his surroundings. He then addressed the nearby police officers, saying, "Did none of you notice the significant number of people who had gone missing?
"Who was it that claimed the market district housed only a handful of controllable Beyonders? Who suggested that arresting them would only pave the way for new criminal organizations, causing even greater chaos?"
His voice, filled with anger, reverberated through the living room of 126 Avenue du Marché, causing each police officer to lower their gaze.
At that moment, Angoulême abruptly turned his attention to the delicate female sculpture. He sensed a fleeting surge of anger emanating from it, quickly dissipating.

He had sensed a faint fluctuation of anger there, but it disappeared in a flash.
A golden light enveloped Angoulême's body as he extended his right palm, opening the abdomen of the statue.
There, a cavity large enough to cradle a curled-up human revealed itself. Within it rested a brownish-green seed, silently crumbling into dust when stirred by the wind.
...
On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.
Lumian furrowed his brow abruptly.
"What's wrong?" Franca asked.
Lumian found himself torn between elation and confusion.
"My Provoker potion has fully digested.
"Could it be that some important figure was provoked by our actions?"
Franca speculated, "Perhaps Lady Moon, or maybe an official Beyonder?"
"All possibilities," Lumian conceded. If he couldn't unravel the mystery, there was no use dwelling on it. After all, it was a positive development.
This meant that he could now advance to become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac!
This realization struck him with a newfound understanding.
He didn't need to meticulously summarize all the principles of acting to fully digest the corresponding potion.
By summarizing a portion of his acting principles and consistently receiving feedback while performing appropriately, he could rely on quantity or the accumulation of time to digest the potion.
Hence, most Beyonders can rely on time and fortunate encounters to digest the potion without being familiar with the acting method... Lumian pondered silently, feeling enlightened.
After distributing the agents and deciding to sell the remaining spoils for money, Lumian bid Franca farewell. Deliberately, he circled Salle de Bal Brise before departing Avenue du Marché and returning to Auberge du Coq Doré.
As he reached the second floor, he noticed that the door to Room 206 stood ajar, allowing the light from a carbide lamp to spill into the dim corridor.
Curiosity piqued, Lumian glanced inside as he passed by, spotting Gabriel seated by the bed in his preferred black dungarees, observing the hallway outside.
"You're finally back!" the playwright exclaimed with delight upon seeing Lumian.
Raising an eyebrow, Lumian queried, "You haven't been arrested by

the police yet?"
"..." Gabriel found himself momentarily speechless.
After a few seconds, his joy overcame him, and he replied, "Monsieur Nathan Lopp didn't report me to the police. In fact, he signed a contract with me and purchased my script.
"He intended to make a down payment of 1,500 verl d'or, but considering how we frightened him, he deducted 500. Once the play commences, I'll receive 2.5% of the ticket revenue for each show."
A soft chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.
"I thought the revolver had coerced him into agreement, fully expecting him to go back on his word. I never imagined that your script would genuinely move him."
If you thought so, why did you still do it? Gabriel grumbled instinctively.
He elaborated, "Monsieur Lopp understands the idiosyncrasies of artists and doesn't mind such matters. He mentioned that his previous mistress was a female painter. She not only kept a sheep on his balcony but also attempted to flirt with men. She even prepared fake props to try and convince him, which ultimately led to their breakup."
"You Trieriens..." Lumian sighed, even as the Prankster King of Cordu.
Gabriel, hailing from a different province and not being a Trierien himself, took Ciel's teasing in stride, unfazed by the remark.
He expressed his gratitude sincerely. "Thank you very much. Although I don't agree with your approach, Monsieur Lopp would have never laid eyes on my script without your help."
Gabriel, perplexed, questioned, "Monsieur Lopp mentioned that we authors weren't cautious enough. We only covered our faces once we reached his doorstep. After conversing with the guard at the lobby, he knew what we looked like. Once he calls the police, there's no escape for any of us.
"Why didn't you mask up earlier when we tied up the guard?"
Gabriel believed that Ciel, being a mob leader, should have been more cautious.
Lumian responded calmly, "Why should I have masked myself?"
"..." Confusion filled Gabriel's face as he asked, "Then why did you eventually mask yourself?"
Lumian replied calmly, "Because Jenna masked up."
What kind of logic is this... Even as a playwright himself, he found it difficult to comprehend Ciel's thoughts.
He could sense that Ciel's state last night was abnormal, but he didn't know the exact reason. It was difficult to determine his

mental state and the motives behind his actions.
Gabriel let out a sigh and remarked, "Fortunately, things turned out well. Otherwise, we would have been apprehended by the police..."
He paused for a moment, realizing that Ciel was a leader of the Savoie Mob. The crimes he had committed in the past were more serious than what happened last night. There was no need to fear. Even if the police came looking for him, he could hide for a day or two, and the matter would pass. No one would pursue him for such a trivial case.
Lumian chuckled and gave Gabriel's shoulder a friendly pat.
"Even if you get caught, you're just an accomplice. You didn't carry a weapon. You can secure your release by posting bail."
With that, Lumian walked towards his room and opened the door to Room 207.
Gabriel watched Ciel's retreating figure, feeling a mixture of confusion and relief.
...
In Room 207, Lumian carefully examined Fallen Mercury.
He felt that if the dirk wasn't repaired, it could last a maximum of three months.
Perhaps I should consult Franca. She might know a few individuals skilled in the mending of mystical artifacts and Beyonder weapons... Lumian half-closed his eyes and established a connection with Fallen Mercury, seeking communication.
After a while, he discerned the swapped fate that had taken place.
The destiny of "Black Scorpion" Roger gulping down alcohol.
Lumian carefully stored Fallen Mercury, stood up, and exited the room, making his way to the third floor.
Approaching the door of Room 310, he overheard the lunatic's frantic cries, still filled with fear.
"I'm dying, I'm dying!"
Lumian pulled out the short wire, unlocking the door. He then beheld the lunatic crouched on the moonlit floor, clutching his head and trembling uncontrollably.
Leaning against the door frame, Lumian couldn't help but let out a chuckle.
"You're rather fortunate. The Montsouris ghost hasn't come to claim your life just yet. I wonder if it's preoccupied or slacking off."

Chapter 229: Equivalent Exchange

The lunatic still wore a grimy linen shirt and yellow trousers, as if changing clothes was not part of his plan.

Upon hearing Lumian's words, he looked up, revealing a face obscured by a black beard.

It seemed as though he had forgotten Lumian entirely. His blue eyes were empty, clouded over.

"I'm dying, I'm dying!" He clutched his shoulder, which was hidden beneath his unruly black hair, and let out another terrified scream.

Lumian approached, his left hand gloved in black, and drew out Fallen Mercury. With a swift motion, he plunged it into the lunatic's shoulder.

The filthy linen shirt tore open, revealing a shallow wound that still oozed blood.

The lunatic stood frozen, as if the long-awaited judgment had finally arrived.

After a few seconds, he collapsed to the ground, placing his hands on the floor as he scrambled away from Lumian.

In his terror, he cried out, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

The tenants in the neighboring rooms heard the commotion, but none of them bothered to investigate. The lunatic often ranted about his impending demise and pleaded not to be killed.

The sinister pewter-black dagger had already left the lunatic's shoulder, and Lumian continued to gaze at the shimmering river of mercury, lost in thought.

He witnessed the blissful first half of the lunatic's life and the tragic deaths of his family, one by one. It was as though Lumian could relate to the sensation of a complete mental breakdown caused by an overwhelming blow.

At times, Lumian yearned to break down like the lunatic, to abandon all reason and act on primal instincts until his own demise. However, there was still a glimmer of hope—a minuscule, almost unrealistic hope—and he was not ready to relinquish it. He desired to pursue it.

Thus, he often acted impulsively and displayed self-destructive tendencies, yet he was always restrained by the rationality that stemmed from that flicker of hope. He never truly disregarded the consequences, existing in a state of profound contradiction.

Knowing precisely which fate he wished to exchange and its approximate date, Lumian swiftly located the lunatic's destiny of encountering the Montsouris ghost in the underground market district. With the tip of the blade, he pried it loose, transforming it

into a droplet of liquid mercury. The drinking fate originally belonging to "Black Scorpion" Roger flowed into the lunatic's body.
Ignoring the lunatic's terrified pleas, Lumian squatted before him. He wiped the blade of Fallen Mercury clean with his clothes and assisted in staunching the bleeding.
Then, Lumian pulled up the only chair and took a seat, patiently awaiting the completion of the fate exchange.
"I'm dying, I'm dying!
"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"
As the lunatic shrieked, time ticked by. Finally, Fallen Mercury quivered gently.
The lunatic's voice abruptly ceased. He rose to his feet, his gaze clearing as he muttered to himself, "I need a drink. I need a drink..."
Lumian smiled and stood up. "The drinks are on you. Consider it a reward for helping you escape the Montsouris ghost."
Naturally, the true reward was the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost. With careful planning and an unguarded target, it served as an excellent tool for assassination.
The lunatic appeared startled for a moment before replying, "You got rid of it?"
"You can choose not to believe me." Lumian turned and walked into the dimly lit corridor, devoid of wall lamps.
The lunatic, driven by an insatiable thirst for drink, unwittingly trailed after Lumian.
As they made their way to the basement bar, the lunatic glanced around and noticed a distinct change in his surroundings.
The eerie sensation of being watched from the shadows had vanished!
Perplexed, the lunatic settled himself at the bar counter and ordered two glasses of oatmeal beer—one for Lumian and the other for himself. He downed his own glass, leaving traces of foam clinging to the corners of his mouth.
Since he occasionally visited the bar in moments of sobriety, no one suspected anything amiss.
After quenching his alcohol craving, the lunatic turned to Lumian and asked once more,
"Have I truly escaped the Montsouris ghost? How did you manage it?"
"I've slain the Montsouris ghost, but I can't be certain if it will resurrect," Lumian replied solemnly. "However, if those who previously encountered it are still among the living, they shall be free from its torment. Remember, I mentioned encountering the Montsouris ghost myself. Look at me—I'm alive and well."

"Really?" The lunatic found it hard to believe that this handsome young man had defeated the Montsouris ghost.
Not even the Church had succeeded!
Lumian smiled.
"I lied. I merely discovered an incantation that prevents the Montsouris ghost from plaguing me, but I require the blood of someone haunted as a conduit."
A glimmer of understanding flickered in the lunatic's eyes.
"No wonder you stabbed me."
Blushing with embarrassment, he admitted, "I may not be able to compensate you at present. My savings are meager, and I must find new employment..."
Lumian interrupted, "What shall I call you?"
"Just Flameng will do," the lunatic replied before inquiring, "And you?"
"Ciel." Lumian downed his oatmeal beer.
By the time his glass contained only a thin film of liquid, Flameng had become quite tipsy. He grasped Lumian's arm and babbled on.
"Did you know? I used to be a university lecturer. Simultaneously, I was entrusted with the safety of some students.
"Many of those students were audacious and reckless, daring to engage in any endeavor and shout slogans of 'freedom' when challenged.
"They even held proms in the catacombs, burning the bones of nameless corpses to warm their asses. They believed in nothing and feared nothing. Of course, I was much the same in those days."
Flameng recounted tales from the first half of his life, his tone shifting between pride, happiness, admonishment of the present ills, and wistful reminiscence.
"Might you have entered the Underground Trier to dissuade certain students from taking risks?" Lumian asked casually, taking a sip of his beer.
Flameng shook his head.
"No, my expertise lies in minerals. The subterranean rock formations of Trier are uniquely fascinating for study. Together with the medical school, we even established a Museum of Mineralogy and Pathology in the catacombs.
"I had been leaving the museum, making my way toward the underground market district with the intention of heading home when I encountered the Montsouris ghost.
"My Sandrine... My Bastian..."
Flameng clutched his head, his voice filled with an agonizing pain.
Lumian quickly changed the subject.

"So, the subterranean rock formations in Trier are quite unique?"
"Indeed," Flameng instinctively replied, before collecting himself and continuing, "We even assigned poetic names to those formations. From top to bottom, they're referred to as 'flowers,' 'sheep,' and 'sedges'..."
Engrossed in conversation, Lumian and Flameng chatted well into the midnight hours. The latter appeared lively, and even his bearded face seemed to regain some color.
He didn't lose his sanity again. Having confirmed that there was no longer a feeling of being watched in the darkness, he returned to normal.
After bidding a cheerful farewell to the intoxicated Flameng, Lumian smiled and withdrew his gaze. He entered Room 207 to compose a letter to Madam Magician.
In the letter, he first mentioned how Termiboros had nearly influenced him into transferring Charlie's luck and how he had slain "Black Scorpion" Roger and other Lady Moon subordinates. Lumian then revealed that the Provoker potion had been completely digested due to the latter. He inquired whether Madam Magician possessed the Pyromaniac potion formula and the associated Beyonder characteristic, as well as the price he needed to pay for them.
Not long after Lumian had tidied up the room and summoned a puppet messenger to deliver the letter, he received a reply from Madam Magician:
"Good job. You've already recognized the potential influence and threat that long-named fellow poses to you. Stay vigilant.
"Based on your description, this Lady Moon should be a Sequence 3. Being able to truly provoke such a demigod will undoubtedly hasten your digestion of the potion.
"If I recall correctly, you are attending Mr. K's gathering tomorrow night and will inform him that you can worship that being. This means you will truly become one of them, completing the initial phase of the mission I assigned you. As a reward, I will provide you with the Pyromaniac potion formula free of charge.
"I still possess the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic, but remember, the principle of equivalent exchange must be upheld.
"In Intis, the two main ingredients of the Pyromaniac potion cost more than 18,000 verl d'or, often exceeding 20,000. Correspondingly, the Beyonder characteristic usually amounts to around 35,000 verl d'or.
"What does this mean? It implies that many people in Intis have become Pyromaniacs, yet many Pyromaniacs have also perished.
"As a holder of a Minor Arcana card, I will offer you a substantial

discount. The Beyonder characteristic will only cost you 30,000 verl d'or.
"Good luck."
Phew, 30,000 verl d'or... Lumian exhaled, feeling that the sum was not unattainable.
He already had over 4,000 verl d'or in savings, and the evil scythe known as Harvest Sacrifice could fetch a decent price. Additionally, he could borrow some funds from Franca and embezzle a portion of Salle de Bal Brise's money. These combined efforts would bring him close to 30,000 verl d'or.
And just as Lumian had suspected, Lady Moon had transformed from a mere Madame to a Lady capable of birthing deities. She was undoubtedly more than a Sequence 4.
Fortunately, we had feigned impending defeat in our previous battle, preventing "Black Scorpion" Roger from seeking assistance... Lumian burned Madam Magician's letter, freshened up, climbed into bed, and drifted off to sleep.
...
Just after six in the morning, Lumian had finished washing up and changed into a crisp white shirt, black vest, brown pants, and sleek leather boots, when he heard footsteps descending from the third floor.
It was Ruhr and Michel, clad in tattered clothes and emanating a pungent odor.
As Lumian stood by the door of Room 207, Ruhr, his voice filled with panic, cried out, "Ciel, Monsieur Ciel! That lunatic is dead!"
Dead? Flameng is dead? Lumian was momentarily stunned before darting past Ruhr and Michel, making his way to the third floor.
The door to Room 310 was wide open. Lumian cast a quick glance inside and spotted Flameng hanging from the window.
He faced the door, having cleanly shaven his face, revealing a gentle and gaunt visage.
Now, he no longer breathed. His face had turned blue, his eyes slightly bulging. His mouth hung open wide, and the morning light streamed through the window, bathing his lifeless body. He hung silently, suspended by a belt tied to the window frame.
Beneath him, on the wooden table, lay a nearly extinguished kerosene lamp, several large books, and a white sheet of paper weighted down by a fountain pen. It appeared that something had been written on it.
Lumian fell into an eerie silence for a few seconds before cautiously approaching the white sheet of paper.
In precise Intisian handwriting, it read:
"When I was deranged, I still harbored the will to live.

"Upon awakening, I found no purpose in life.
"Please lay me to rest in the Underground Tomb of Lights within the catacombs."
Lumian raised his gaze, meeting the vacant blue eyes that seemed to peer back from beyond the grave.
He stood in solemn silence, transfixed, as if time had come to a halt.

Chapter 230: Scapegoat

At the stroke of 8 a.m., a pair of law enforcement officers ambled up to the third floor of Auberge du Coq Doré. One meticulously examined the lifeless body, the suicide note, and the surroundings, while the other commenced interrogating the neighboring tenants.

Lumian, already disguised using the Mystery Prying Glasses, had taken his position at the entrance of Room 310.

The officer, donning a uniform and clutching a pen and paper, cast a fleeting glance in his direction.

"You must be Ciel Dubois. Enlighten me on the matter."

Lumian proceeded to recount how Flameng's sanity was gone prior to his arrival. The man incessantly raved about encountering the Montsouris ghost and the demise of his own kin. Soon, it seemed, his turn was imminent. Lumian continued, revealing how Flameng had abruptly regained consciousness the previous night and indulged in a bout of heavy drinking.

"What about the wound on his shoulder?" interjected the officer attending to the deceased in the room.

"Before he regained consciousness last night, he inflicted the injury upon himself. I was the one who bound it up," Lumian responded with composure.

After interrogating the other tenants and the proprietor of the basement bar, the two officers cautiously deduced that the deceased had long been plagued by mental instability. He possessed a motive for suicide and displayed corresponding behavioral tendencies.

As they maneuvered Flameng's body into the mortuary bag, they addressed Lumian, saying, "We shall transport him to the catacombs, but it's a rather intricate procedure. It entails ascertaining the precise cause of death, summoning a clergyman for purification rites, finding a suitable heir for his estate, and liaising with the catacomb administrators. This will take roughly a week or two."

Lumian fell silent momentarily before resuming, "I've shared a few drinks with him. Remember to inform me when you lay him to rest."

Affirming their agreement, the two officers departed Auberge du Coq Doré, taking Flameng's body and the belongings from the room along with them.

Lumian removed his disguise and returned to Room 207.

Seated in a chair, his back to the window casting sunlight, he faced the dimly lit corridor, grappling with a swirl of emotions.

Flameng's suicide had presented Lumian with an alternative fate.
Lumian had aided Flameng in evading the Montsouris ghost, not driven by a desire for personal gain or reward. It was simply because he saw a reflection of his own predicament in the man who had lost his family. One had succumbed completely, descending into lunacy, while the other persevered, clinging to a glimmer of hope and desperately struggling to maintain his grasp on reason.
But in the end, Flameng, no longer tormented by the Montsouris ghost and driven to madness by fear, had opted to terminate his own existence.
In the corridor, Elodie, her tresses concealed beneath a blonde wig and her eyes accentuated with eyeshadow, alongside the other cleaning lady, had already commenced their bustling day. They worked ceaselessly, mopping the floors and battling bedbugs without respite.
Lumian observed silently, his gaze appearing distant and unfocused.
After the passage of nearly fifteen minutes, light yet hurried footfalls reverberated along the staircase, eventually reaching Room 207.
Jenna's silhouette came into Lumian's view. Today, she donned a more understated attire compared to her usual flamboyance. Her blouse clung slightly, complementing the gentle brown shade of her top and a fluffy, beige, short skirt. She sported knee-high black boots, and her makeup exuded both decadence and allure.
She glanced at Lumian, entered Room 207, and gently shut the wooden door behind her.
Lumian snapped out of his reverie and observed her silently, refraining from questioning her intentions.
Jenna repressed her curiosity and excitement before speaking up.
"Have you heard? The boss and two leaders of the Poison Spur Gang have been murdered!"
"I'm aware," Lumian acknowledged with a nod.
Jenna scrutinized his expression and deliberately probed further.
"You weren't involved, were you?"
"Do you think I possess the capability to eliminate 'Black Scorpion' Roger, 'Baldy' Harman, and 'Short-legged Candlestick' Castina all at once?" Lumian retorted.
Jenna, having already gleaned an estimation of Ciel's strength from Franca, understood that "Black Scorpion" Roger was no less formidable than Franca herself. She shook her head and uttered, "No."
She then drawled in a leisurely tone, "But you can still seek

assistance."
For instance, Franca.
"The authorities don't even suspect me," Lumian stated, shrugging his shoulders.
In truth, he found this matter rather perplexing.
Ordinarily, as one of the few individuals who had recently engaged in a direct confrontation with the Poison Spur Gang, he would undoubtedly be subjected to questioning following such an incident. Yet, Lumian had remained on standby since last night, prepared to don a disguise at a moment's notice, yet no investigators had arrived.
Just then, hurried footsteps echoed from the staircase.
Knock, knock, knock. Knocks resounded against the door of Room 207.
Charlie? Lumian's gaze fixated on the door as he beckoned, "Come in. It's not locked."
The visitor who stood before them was none other than Charlie. Clad in a crisp white shirt, a light-colored vest, and a formal black suit, he exuded an air of dignity. Atop his head rested a half top hat, while a dark bow tie completed his ensemble.
His attire seemed even more refined than when he served as an attendant at Hôtel du Cygne Blanc.
After sizing up Charlie, Lumian couldn't help but smile.
"Well, well, where did this civilized individual come from?"
Charlie couldn't conceal his own grin. His tone brimmed with warmth and enthusiasm as he replied, "Right? I am now a true gentleman. I'm still in the process of mastering classical grammar. Madame, Monsieur, please allow me to extend my civilized greetings."
With those words, he removed his half top hat, pressed it against his chest, and offered a slight bow.
Jenna chuckled but didn't discourage Charlie. Lumian clicked his tongue and remarked, "To be frank, you're more like a monkey playing dress-up in civilized clothing."
Charlie remained unaffected, his joy unwavering.
"I've only just begun my studies. In a month's time, you'll witness an entirely different version of me. Oh, by the way, this is Monsieur Charlie Collent. He is currently enjoying a sumptuous dinner worth 8 verl d'or!"
At this point, Charlie glanced at Jenna, who stood beside the bed. He opened his mouth as if he had something to say, yet hesitated to do so in her presence.
Nonchalantly, Lumian inquired, "What's the matter? Just speak your mind."

Charlie lowered his voice.
"Did you hear? Last night, 'Black Scorpion' Roger, 'Baldy' Harman, and 'Short-legged Candlestick' Castina were all killed."
"I'm aware. And?" Lumian believed Charlie wouldn't seek him out for something that would soon become public knowledge.
Charlie glanced at Jenna and continued, "What has been confirmed is that the murderer belongs to a terrorist organization known as the Aurora Order. They have a penchant for gruesome displays of carnage and primarily target individuals who worship evil gods. In this case, 'Black Scorpion' Roger and his cohorts followed an evil god named the Great Mother."
Aurora Order? Lumian was taken aback.
Where did this scapegoat come from?
Why were the official Beyonders suddenly pointing fingers at the Aurora Order?
Shouldn't they first investigate those who had conflicts with "Black Scorpion" Roger and the Poison Spur Gang? That's how detective novels were written!
"Are you saying that the Aurora Order truly carried out these murders?" Jenna inquired curiously.
Charlie nodded emphatically.
"That's correct. The Aurora Order appears to have claimed responsibility for these acts in some capacity. Tomorrow, there should be reports about the case in certain newspapers."
The latter half of Charlie's statement suggested that the information he had just shared was meant to be disclosed and held no confidentiality clauses.
The Aurora Order claiming responsibility? They weren't even involved. *Why would they assume responsibility?* Lumian found himself momentarily perplexed yet slightly amused.
If he hadn't personally slain "Black Scorpion" Roger, he might have suspected the Aurora Order as the culprits.
Charlie glanced at Lumian and added in a hushed tone, "This afternoon, once the election concludes, a crackdown on the mobs in the entire market district shall commence in response to the public's concerns about the district's security."
Are you reading from a document? Your words sound so official. Lumian realized why Charlie had rushed to inform him.
It was best for those with dirt on them to leave the market district this afternoon and hide for the time being!
Lumian nodded subtly and replied, "I have a mysticism gathering to attend this afternoon."
Although Mr. K's gathering was scheduled for 9 p.m., Lumian intended to arrive early.

Charlie breathed a sigh of relief and gestured toward the door.
"I'll make a move first."
After a moment of contemplation, Lumian responded, "In the future, there's no need to inform me about such trivial matters."
He added mockingly, "Do you doubt my abilities?"
Charlie sheepishly smiled.
"It's my first time, so I couldn't help but feel a bit emotional. Don't worry, unless it truly concerns you, I won't drop any more hints."
As Lumian watched Charlie depart, Jenna clicked her tongue and sighed.
"He's turned into your spy among the official Beyonders."
"I'd prefer it if he wasn't," Lumian mumbled, pursing his lips. "He's just an imbecile, bound to mess things up."
Jenna scoffed and waved her hand.
"I'm going to find Franca. Are you planning to share the information Charlie gave us with the others?"
Lumian shook his head.
"If everyone flees, the official Beyonders will undoubtedly investigate any leaks. That imbecile won't be able to escape.
"Besides, some people deserve to end up in jail."
And you don't? Jenna criticized as she left Room 207 and stepped into the corridor.
At that moment, the two cleaning ladies had already reached the staircase.
Jenna hurried over, her gaze sweeping across the cleaning lady named Elodie, who wore a blond wig.
Suddenly, Jenna's expression froze, and she swiftly turned around, heading back to Room 207. Lumian, who was about to leave, found it peculiar.
Elodie, a woman of almost 50 years with a blond wig and eye shadow, also noticed Jenna. She stared at the apprentice actress's retreating figure for a few seconds before calling out in confusion and concern, "Celia..."
Jenna's body went rigid.
She slowly turned back, forcing a smile, and greeted Elodie with a loud voice, "Mother."
Mother? Lumian almost couldn't believe his ears.
Then he recalled Elodie mentioning that she used to be a theater actress and now enjoyed watching performances at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. Her husband had passed away a few years ago in a factory accident, leaving behind two nearly adult children who helped support the family.
Jenna, on the other hand, was an apprentice actress at the same theater. Her father had also passed away a few years ago, leaving

only her mother and brother. Her plan was to earn enough money for her tuition fees and other expenses for the coming year.
It all adds up... Lumian nodded thoughtfully.
Elodie approached Jenna with a broom, assessing her appearance. "Why are you here? And what kind of makeup is that?"

Chapter 231: Mr. K's Purpose

Jenna's eyes darted around, her arm raised in the air.
"This is a requirement for my theater acting class!"
Her words seemed to ease her tension, and her smile took on a more natural quality.
"Didn't I mention that I work part-time as a waitress at a bar to make ends meet? This is my boss. I'm here to discuss a salary increase with him!"
Jenna pointed confidently at Lumian, stationed by the door of Room 207.
Elodie glanced at Lumian, then fixed her gaze on Jenna for a few moments before nodding. "Don't forget to come home tonight."
Jenna's smile faltered momentarily before she replied, "Okay."
Seeing Elodie return to her tasks, cleaning the other side of the second floor, Jenna tiptoed down the stairs and made her way out of Auberge du Coq Doré.
It didn't take long for her to spot Lumian catching up to her, prompting her to grumble, "Dammit! Why is my mother at Auberge du Coq Doré?"
Lumian contemplated for a moment before responding. "Blame it on Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. Monsieur Ive, the owner of Auberge du Coq Doré, found a part-time cleaning lady who works only half a day there. And your mother is a regular visitor at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons for plays."
Jenna clenched her teeth and exclaimed, "Those cursed heretics!"
She then threw up her arm.
"Tonight, I'll tell her the truth. I'll say I'm working part-time as an underground singer to save up for next year's tuition, and I earn quite a bit!"
Lumian glanced at Jenna's side profile, curious. "You don't seem too nervous or afraid?"
Jenna spat.
"That's my mother, not some man-eating monster.
"She's kind-hearted and understanding. I didn't tell her what I was up to before because I didn't want her to worry."
"She'll worry now, though," Lumian reminded her.
Being an underground singer in dance halls and bars often involved dealing with shady characters. Being taken advantage of was an unfortunate reality from time to time.
Jenna's smile was mischievous as she playfully remarked, "I'm the mistress of Ciel Dubois, leader of the Savoie Mob and guardian of Salle de Bal Brise. Who dares to mess with me?"
Lumian chuckled. "That's even more dangerous."

Jenna averted her gaze and observed the street vendors on Rue Anarchie.
"If my mother can't accept it, I plan to demonstrate my current abilities and convince her that I can protect myself."
Oh, really? Lumian didn't raise the example of the perverted Hedsey.
Jenna composed herself and said in a heavy voice, "She's been through so much. She has worked tirelessly for years. I want to help her shoulder some of the burden so she won't break herself."
Lumian contemplated for a moment before responding. "Since your father's passing?"
Jenna's gaze shifted to the ground, and she tersely confirmed, "There was an accident at the factory. My father was severely injured and spent over ten days in the hospital. In the end, he couldn't be saved."
"We used up all our savings and still owe a significant amount of money. A few years ago, I could have pursued a career in theater and studied acting. But it wasn't until the beginning of this year that we managed to repay almost half of our debt and save up some money for my education. My mother insisted that we couldn't delay any longer. If we kept delaying, I would become too old."
Lumian listened attentively, his brow furrowing in puzzlement. "No compensation for the factory accident?"
"Yes, but that scoundrel hasn't compensated us yet!" Jenna clenched her teeth. "He keeps appealing, and the courts always take their time. F*cking dammit, is he trying to drag it out until we're all dead?"
Lumian fell silent briefly before changing the subject. "Was your mother truly a theater actress?"
"That's correct." Jenna's expression softened gradually. "She had great acting skills and was beautiful, but most theater managers, sponsors, and owners were men. They would prey on actresses in the theater like lions patrolling their territory. Those who refused to submit to them wouldn't get good roles. It's infuriating, everyone thinks it's normal, even the police and the courts!
"My mother has a gentle nature, but she's fiercely stubborn. She could only land supporting roles and was even fired once. When the theater she worked at went bankrupt, she lost the chance to return to the stage temporarily. She had to take on odd jobs as a motel maid and laundry worker.
"That's when she met my father. They got together and became husband and wife in the presence of God. Praise the Sun. At that time, my father was working hard to become a skilled laborer. My

mother took on various jobs and saved money while searching for an opportunity to return to the theater. Those were the days she cherished the most.
"Later, my brother and I were born. Mom and Dad became busier, struggling to make ends meet and give us a chance to pursue an education.
"When we became self-sufficient, my mother was already old and couldn't return to the stage. She placed her hopes on me. She wanted to see me become an exceptional actress, even if it meant playing supporting roles. My father wished for my brother to become a skilled laborer."
These words had been bottled up inside Jenna's heart for a long time, and only now did she find the opportunity to express them.
Lumian patiently waited for Jenna to finish before posing a question. "Do you aspire to be a theater actress yourself?"
Jenna beamed with pride and contentment. "It's hard not to love theater when your mother is such a dedicated fan and talented actress."
Her smile inexplicably evoked a twinge of jealousy in Lumian.
Sighing with a touch of emotion, he remarked, "I can tell that your mother has a genuine passion for theater. Even as a cleaning lady, she adorns herself with makeup and wears exquisite wigs."
Jenna lightly nodded and shared, "She says it makes her feel youthful, as if she's back on the stage. In her eyes, she remains a true theater actress, and her other jobs are merely part-time endeavors.
"She's always been like this. She takes me to witness the sunrise, reminding me that darkness will always give way to light. And she tells me that even in the darkest times, I must find a way to kindle my own inner light. Only then can I patiently await the sunrise."
Jenna's yearning for the future grew palpable.
"If I continue as an underground singer for another year, I'll save enough for next year's tuition and make significant progress in repaying our debts. With the combined earnings of my mother and brother, we won't be burdened anymore. Soon, she won't have to juggle multiple jobs, and my brother will have the opportunity to learn skills from others!"
As Jenna spoke, her excitement grew, and she couldn't help but raise her arm, as if reaching out to grasp the beauty of the future.
Lumian observed Jenna silently, and a wave of pent-up emotions within him seemed to dissipate.
Hope. Such a profound and moving word.
After a few moments of relief, Jenna suddenly felt an inexplicable sense of embarrassment. She turned her head and gave Lumian an

accusing glare.
"Why are you staring at me? Haven't you seen someone getting excited before?"
Lumian scoffed but chose not to respond.
Jenna studied him intently and muttered to herself, "Why do I feel like you're in better spirits?"
"No," Lumian replied succinctly.
At that moment, the two of them had already entered Avenue du Marché. Posters celebrating Hugues Artois's successful election as a member of parliament adorned the surroundings.
Hugues Artois, the joint support of the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob, has indeed become a member of parliament... I wonder what changes he will bring to the market district... Lumian averted his gaze from the poster, his mind echoing Franca's words: Lady Moon, a follower of the Great Mother, believed that Hugues Artois was an open-minded individual.
...
In the afternoon, prior to embarking on his journey to Avenue du Boulevard in search of Mr. K, Lumian arranged an altar in the second-floor bedroom of Salle de Bal Brise.
With the wall of spirituality in place, Lumian proceeded to light three candles in the order from deity to mankind, left to right. After carefully dripping essential oils and extracts, he took a couple of steps back, enveloped in a misty atmosphere, and intoned in a deep voice,"The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck."
A faint gray fog arose, accompanied by an unsettling aura.
Suppressing the sluggishness of his thoughts and the tingling sensation beneath his skin, Lumian fixed his gaze upon the bluish-black flame of the candle. Following the instructions of Madam Magician, he recited the subsequent incantation in the ancient language of Hermes.
"I implore you, I implore your protection..."
After a series of gestures, Lumian caught sight of the divine angel, seemingly materialized from pure light.
Simultaneously, he faintly heard a dreamy sigh.
A sigh originating from an infinite height.
Descending from above in resplendent and ethereal form, the angel extended its arms to embrace Lumian.
Wings of radiant light enveloped him.
When Lumian regained consciousness, everything had returned to its usual state.
...

As evening descended upon 19 Rue Scheer, Avenue du Boulevard, Lumian once again found himself in the basement, face-to-face with Mr. K.

Clad in his customary voluminous hood and black robe, Mr. K sat silently upon a chair with a crimson backrest.

Meeting Lumian's gaze, Mr. K nodded gently and spoke in a low, raspy voice, "I am highly pleased with your adeptness in action. What's more, unknowingly, your actions align with the teachings of my lord, countering those Blessed of evil beings!"

Pausing momentarily, Mr. K inquired, "Have you given it sufficient thought?"

"Yes, I have," Lumian replied, lowering his head. "You have revealed to me the magnificence of the Lord."

"Haha!" Mr. K burst into a maniacal laughter, as if his sanity had slipped away.

After a few seconds, he regained composure and disregarded the attendants, ensuring they stayed put. He continued, "My lord's honorific name is the Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God, the Lord who reigns behind the curtain of shadows, the ruler of the mind world, and the degenerated nature of all living things. Choose any three and entreat Him in Hermes."

The mere description by Mr. K caused Lumian's garments, skin, flesh, and bones to dissolve completely, leaving behind an unnerving sensation of pure consciousness and self-awareness.

Involuntarily trembling, Lumian instinctively recited, "The Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God, the Lord who reigns behind the curtain of shadows..."

Lumian's mind was too overwhelmed to deliberate, and he unconsciously selected the first three phrases.

Almost instantly, his surroundings darkened, as if enshrouded by a heavy curtain.

Beyond the illusory and profound shadowed veil, a pair of eyes fixated upon Lumian, penetrating his consciousness and nearly rendering him unconscious.

After an indeterminate period, Lumian regained his faculties, his body drenched in cold sweat.

Rising from his seat, Mr. K's deep voice seemed laced with a smile.

"Henceforth, you are our brother, truly one of us.

"We're a secret organization that believes in the True Creator. We go by the name of the Aurora Order."

"Aurora Order?" Lumian was taken aback.

Isn't this the terrorist organization that took the blame for me?

It seems that the official Beyonders did not misidentify their

target...
I have truly become a member of the Aurora Order...
Dismissing the attendants from the basement, Mr. K addressed Lumian, "Gardner Martin is a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. This secret organization once revered our lord, but in recent years, they have distanced themselves from us and ceased their frequent prayers. They appear to be plotting something of great significance.
"I have assigned you to infiltrate their ranks, for I hope you can discover the cause behind their actions and unravel their intentions."

Chapter 232: Financing of Activities

The Iron and Blood Cross Order... appears to have some significant plans in the works... Lumian finally grasped Mr. K's true intentions for persuading him to join a mob.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order—an equally secretive organization—seemed to be related to a competition of faith and Trier's situation.

Curiosity stirring within him, Lumian inquired, "What exactly is the Iron and Blood Cross Order?"

The more Lumian understood, the more he inclined towards actions that would gain Gardner Martin's approval.

Mr. K let out a chuckle. "Allow Gardner Martin to personally enlighten you. If you possess knowledge about their circumstances before they disclose it to you, they are likely to notice some problem."

So, you found a wanted, simple country boy like me to be a spy? You wanted someone with a clean slate and humble background? Lumian pondered, nodding thoughtfully.

His thoughts wandered to the mysterious item Gardner Martin had smuggled into Trier through Rat Christo, as well as the support the Savoie Mob extended to Hugues Artois. After two seconds of contemplation, Lumian voiced his suspicion, "Could the Iron and Blood Cross Order's plan be connected to Hugues Artois?"

In a raspy voice, Mr. K responded, "According to the information we've gathered, that is merely one component, not the primary one."

I see... Lumian then broached the topic of "mirror people" before continuing, "Gardner Martin seemed aware that the item he had the smuggling caravan transport could trigger a corresponding incident."

Mr. K fell silent momentarily before speaking, "I suspect that item holds immense importance. It's a matter you'll need to unravel. Don't worry. Our Aurora Order is generous with rewards. When the time comes, you can make any request."

Just as Lumian was about to internally utter the words, "Help me revive my sister," Mr. K added, "As long as it lies within my power."

Very straightforward... If I genuinely become an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and gain access to pertinent information, they will undoubtedly grant me certain privileges. And in turn, I can seek rewards from the Aurora Order. Yes... This is akin to further fulfilling Madam Magician's mission. She won't reject me, the bearer of a Minor Arcana card... Such "treatment" is rare—to receive three rewards for a single task... As Lumian

silently sighed, he assumed it wouldn't matter if he faced rejection.
"I now require some financing for my future endeavors."
The purpose of these funds was to enhance Lumian's personal strength and establish a "solid foundation" for completing the mission.
Mr. K nodded. "No problem. I will provide you with 10,000 verl d'or later. This is one of the perks of officially joining our Aurora Order and participating in a high-risk mission."
In Intis, "perk" was a commonly used term coined by Emperor Roselle.
Very generous... At that moment, he found himself wondering if he should seek out more secret organizations like this one, just to enjoy additional membership perks.
Rising from his seat, Mr. K extended his hands and began to circle Lumian slowly.
As he walked, he spoke in a solemn tone, "My Lord is the great being who created this world, the father of all living creatures."
"We all originate from Him, carrying the divine essence He bestowed upon us."
"Divinity exists within every living being, and no one is inherently more noble than another. We distinguish our status based on our proximity to our Lord and our ability to embrace His teachings."
"It is through our shared divinity that we can consume potions, face trials, and accumulate more divine power. Ultimately, we can become angels in service to my Lord..."
Is he preaching? Lumian couldn't help but feel that there were similarities between Mr. K's words and Madam Magician's story of the original Creator—the Oldest One—fragmenting and manifesting different Beyonder characteristics. They seemed to share a common essence.
This led him to suspect that the True Creator of the Aurora Order corresponded to the Oldest One.
After nearly fifteen minutes, Mr. K concluded his preaching and traced a cross on his chest, starting from the top and moving to the bottom, left, and right.
"Praise be to you, the creator of all things. Praise be to you, who carries the burdens of the world's sins."
Lumian followed suit, offering his own words of praise.
Mr. K then proceeded to introduce the Aurora Order.
"We currently have a total of seven Saints and twenty-two Oracles, each designated by alphabetical code names, scattered across various locations..."
There are still 21 individuals as powerful as Mr. K? The Saints are

Sequence 4 and Sequence 3 demigods with godhood. And there are a total of seven in the Aurora Order? Lumian was taken aback by this revelation.
The Aurora Order was far more formidable than he had anticipated!
As for whether there were any figures on the level of angels, Mr. K did not mention it, leaving Lumian to wonder.
Concluding the introduction, Mr. K took hold of his right index finger with his left hand and tore it off. He then tossed it to Lumian, the finger dripping with blood.
"Use it in times of dire need."
Lumian caught the finger, its blood already congealing, and imagined the phantom pain he had experienced before.
Although he was unafraid of pain or injuries in battle and could stab himself without hesitation when necessary, he couldn't simply pluck out a finger without reason, as Mr. K had done.
In a matter of moments, a new finger sprouted from Mr. K's hand, its skin fair and unblemished.
With the gathering scheduled for 9 p.m., Lumian secured the 10,000 verl d'or and made his way to Psychic's old journal library, a lavish off-white six-story building located at 19 Rue Scheer. He stayed there until 6 p.m.
Then, he leisurely found a nearby restaurant and spent 2 verl d'or on an inexpensive set meal.
The meal included an ordinary bottle of red wine, a bowl of soup, three dishes, a dessert, and an unlimited supply of bread.
Lumian made his selections from the provided menu, opting for a beef chowder, braised rabbit meat, and a serving of roasted cauliflower.
As the gathering commenced, Lumian, already in possession of the Scorpion Poison, sold the aquatic monster's blood, poisonous scales, and other items he had no use for, fetching him 100 verl d'or.
Thus far, he had amassed a total of 14,710 verl d'or and 24 coppet in cash, mostly courtesy of Mr. K.
This filled him with confidence that he could gather the remaining 30,000 verl d'or within a short span of time.
If he borrowed a bit here and pocketed a bit there, combined with the spoils of war, wouldn't he have enough?
Shortly before 11 p.m., Lumian returned to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
Ruhr and Michel, residents of the third floor who made a living selling photos of street maîtresse d'atelier near the Suhit steam locomotive station, were hauling a bulging flaxen-colored cloth

bag up the stairs.
Lumian cast a curious glance at the white-haired duo and asked, slightly puzzled, "So late?"
He knew that Ruhr and Michel also worked as part-time scavengers, having encountered them on a few occasions before. However, he recalled that their work typically ended by nine.
Ruhr, clad in tattered clothing with a slight hunch to his back, mustered a smile and replied with a touch of joy, "Tonight, the member of parliament's office hosted a celebratory feast and discarded a lot of valuable rubbish. We waited until the bags could no longer hold before returning."
The market district's member of parliament's office was celebrating Hugues Artois's election? Lumian nodded subtly and walked past the elderly couple, making his way to Room 207.
Before igniting the carbide lamp, he noticed a square-folded white paper on the table, illuminated by the faint crimson moonlight streaming through the window.
Observing the neatly folded paper, Lumian suspected it to be a letter from Madam Magician.
The Pyromaniac potion formula? Did she have the messenger leave the Pyromaniac potion formula here before my arrival? Is she so confident in my ability to become an official member of the Aurora Order? Or does she have something else to inform me about? These thoughts raced through Lumian's mind as he ignited the carbide lamp, picked up the white paper, and carefully unfolded it.
"Your next mission is to complete the task assigned by Mr. K. Do you understand what I mean?
"Pyromaniac potion formula:
"Main ingredient: Fire Salamander gland, Magma Elf core;
"Supplementary ingredients: 50 milliliters of Fire Salamander blood, 10 grams of Magma Pyroxene powder, 10 grams of Redcrown Balsam powder, 10 drops of Sun Star extract.
"Usage: What do you think?"
She actually wrote down the main ingredient... Does this mean I'll need the accompanying parts for the potion? Is Madam Magician also interested in uncovering the Iron and Blood Cross Order's current situation? How did she know that today would be the day Mr. K would assign me this task? Or does she simply disregard Mr. K's intentions? Does she only hope that I can gain more of Mr. K's trust and gradually become a core member of the Aurora Order? Lumian leaned towards the first possibility, but he couldn't dismiss the latter.
For now, he had no choice but to follow her instructions.

Having attended two mysticism gatherings, Lumian had developed a certain understanding of the potion formula's value. He knew that the Pyromaniac potion formula in his possession was worth at least 30,000 verl d'or.

If he were to sell it, he could exchange it for the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.

Of course, this idea was fleeting. Without Madam Magician's explicit agreement, he didn't dare entertain it.

Wouldn't it be equivalent to trading Madam Magician's potion formula for her Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic?

Instead, Lumian found a more feasible plan, inspired by a popular trade scheme in Intis which was also known as Commercial Paradise or Financial Empire.

The plan required a down payment of 10,000 verl d'or, with the remaining 20,000 to be paid in installments over a year, along with a 10 to 15% interest.

After careful consideration, Lumian, sensing a high likelihood of Madam Magician possessing godhood, dismissed the idea.

He had already gathered almost half of the required funds. There was no need to risk offending a demigod by negotiating installments.

Even if Harvest Sacrifice didn't yield a satisfactory price or Franca had little savings due to her extravagant lifestyle, Salle de Bal Brise still had a substantial amount of cash in its safe. As the protector of the dance hall, what harm would there be in embezzling a small sum?

Chapter 233: Advance Payment

Realizing the lateness of the hour, Lumian planned on delving into Aurore's grimoire until midnight. He resolved to seek out Franca the next morning and inquire about the sale of Harvest Sacrifice. Additionally, he intended to ask her to keep a watchful eye on the supplementary ingredients like Fire Salamander blood and Magma Pyroxene powder.

Hmm, Franca is known for her late sleeping habits. If I go searching for her now, she'll surely still be awake. Most likely, she'll be asleep before 11 a.m. tomorrow... Taking this into consideration, Lumian had a change of heart. He tidied the wooden table, rose from his seat, and departed from Auberge du Coq Doré.

3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in front of Apartment 601.

After knocking a few times, Lumian caught sight of Franca. Her flaxen locks were disheveled, and she wore a lake-blue silk nightgown as she opened the door.

"What's the matter this time?" the Witch inquired, a smile gracing her lips as she stepped aside to make way.

Lumian didn't respond immediately. He glanced around and inquired, "Is Jenna not here?"

Unconsciously, Franca's smile faded away.

"Are you here for her? She doesn't have to perform tonight. She left early today."

Lumian nodded.

"That's good. I won't have to climb the outer wall and leave later then."

"..." Franca's lips twitched, and she clicked her tongue with a chuckle. "So, you've come to mock me?"

After playing a simple prank, Lumian settled himself on the gray divan.

Just as he was about to speak, Franca, who had curled up in the recliner, causing her nightgown's hem to slip, let out a soft chuckle.

"You missed quite a show in the market district this afternoon.

"The police took care of all the places tied to the mob. Brignais, Simon, Christo, and Black were all apprehended and brought to the police headquarters. They nearly fell into the clutches of the official Beyonders and received their customary treatment. Luckily, Gardner managed to contact the newly elected Hugues Artois and convinced him to exert pressure on the two Churches and the police headquarters. By throwing a few scapegoats under the bus, the matter was resolved."

Hugues Artois is indeed in cahoots with the Boss... Lumian chuckled.
"You didn't get caught?"
"I didn't go to any of those locations today. I spent the whole afternoon playing Fighting Evil with Jenna and my star dancer. Why would I get caught? You see, there's nothing wrong with being lazy. My favorite saying is that lazy people are blessed by being lazy," Franca replied, amused.
"I've never heard that before," Lumian asked casually. "Where does this proverb come from?"
"I made it up," Franca replied nonchalantly.
Pondering Franca's explanation, Lumian's suspicions were confirmed.
"Did Jenna suggest staying indoors in the afternoon and playing cards?"
"How did you know?" Franca exclaimed in surprise.
She scrutinized Lumian, her gaze turning suspicious.
Could it be that Jenna told him herself? Had they shared so much in private?
Lumian had nothing to hide and spoke frankly, "Charlie paid me a visit today, and Jenna happened to be there. From him, I learned that the official Beyonders and the police headquarters planned a joint operation to clean up the mobsters in the market district this afternoon.
"I advised Jenna to keep it a secret so as not to trouble Charlie. And it seems she's proven to be trustworthy. She simply kept you occupied in the apartment," Lumian explained.
Franca's face brightened with understanding. "No wonder you weren't around in the afternoon."
A smug expression crossed her features. "Jenna is still on my side!"
She let out a satisfied sigh before curiosity tinged her voice as Franca asked warily, "Why did Jenna come to you?"
Lumian smiled knowingly. "After the demise of 'Black Scorpion' Roger, she finds me suspicious due to my ongoing conflict with the Poison Spur Mob."
Franca's response was a mix of relief and amusement.
"The Aurora Order ended up being the scapegoat in this case."
"Since I arrived in Trier, I've noticed in the newspapers that whenever something happened, the terrorist group known as the Aurora Order would claim responsibility. But I never imagined that we would finally get a taste of that treatment. The subsequent investigations were misled, and no one suspected us."
The Aurora Order is indeed responsible for this... After Lumian mocked Franca, he steered the conversation back on track.

"Taking advantage of the situation, I attended a mysticism gathering in the afternoon and managed to obtain the formula for the Pyromaniac potion, as well as some clues about its main ingredient."
"You're quite fortunate," Franca exclaimed, her eyes widening slightly. "If we weren't in Intis, I'd doubt your story. It's only in Intis that the Pyromaniac potion formula is so readily available."
Lumian then made a request.
"Please help me keep an eye on the supplementary ingredients: Fire Salamander's blood, Magma Pyroxene powder, and Redcrown Balsam."
He omitted mentioning Sun Star, as it was relatively common and could be found in larger flower shops.
"No problem," Franca assured him. She inquired about the quantities of each ingredient in detail before raising another concern. "Do you have enough money? I mean, enough to purchase the main ingredient for the potion."
From her perspective, Lumian had likely spent all his savings on the Pyromaniac potion formula.
Lumian seized the opportunity to respond, "Actually, I was just about to ask if Harvest Sacrifice had been sold."
"How can it be sold so soon? It's only been a day! I haven't even had the chance to attend any mysticism gatherings," Franca replied, pausing before offering a solution. "If you urgently need money, I can lend you some. After all, I don't have any immediate need for the next potion."
"There's no rush," Lumian replied after considering the matter.
He still needed to gather all the supplementary ingredients.
Franca estimated, "Based on my experience, Harvest Sacrifice won't fetch a high price due to its inevitable side effects. You can expect it to sell for around 10,000 to 12,000 verl d'or."
"When you need the money, I can directly provide you with 6,000 verl d'or, considering it a buyout of Harvest Sacrifice. Additionally, I can lend you 20,000 to 30,000 verl d'or, but you must return it within three months."
"Alright," Lumian agreed without hesitation.
He then produced Fallen Mercury and said to Franca, "I need to find someone who can repair Beyonder weapons."
Franca examined the dirk with its ominous patterns and asked in confusion, "What's the point of repairing a Beyonder weapon? Its energy will deplete eventually."
"It's tremendously useful. I want to utilize it for as long as possible," Lumian admitted, though he naturally refrained from mentioning that he had a means to replenish Fallen Mercury's

energy.
Of course, he had to wait until he reached Sequence 6 and could withstand the corruption. Otherwise, Termiboros would undoubtedly seize the opportunity to cause trouble.
"That's true," Franca recalled Fallen Mercury's impressive performance in the battle against "Black Scorpion" Roger. "I'll help you inquire, but no Artisan would likely accept the task of repairing a suspected corrupted Beyonder weapon. They fear the potential adverse effects it could have on them."
Artisan... a Beyonder skilled in repairing mystical items and Beyonder weapons? After exchanging a few more words with Franca, Lumian left Room 601 and returned to Avenue du Marché, entering Salle de Bal Brise.
Despite it almost being midnight, the place was still bustling. Lumian made his way to the finance office on the second floor corridor. As he unlocked the safe, he asked about the accountant and the cashier on the night shift.
"How much cash do we have at the moment?"
The accountant, a refined bespectacled woman in her thirties, replied with a hint of apprehension, "Approximately 28,000 verl d'or and some change."
Lumian had already opened the safe's door by then, revealing stacks of banknotes and shimmering golden coins.
After a quick calculation, he calmly requested, "Give me 12,000 verl d'or."
"Huh?" Both the accountant and the cashier exclaimed fearfully.
While Monsieur Ciel was the protector of Salle de Bal Brise, taking away such a substantial amount of cash in one go was unthinkable!
The accountant exchanged a glance with the young cashier, silently indicating her to find the dance hall manager, René, in the adjacent office.
Dressed in formal attire, Gardner Martin's designated representative glanced at the open safe and inquired, "Monsieur Ciel, why do you need to withdraw 12,000 verl d'or?"
"Personal expenses," Lumian replied calmly.
René pondered for a few seconds before responding, "No problem.
"In the first two years, Baron Brignais would take between 40,000 and 50,000 verl d'or from the dance hall annually. During the transition, he even withdrew 15,000 verl d'or, which would have counted as part of the first half of the year. And it's not even the second half yet. Monsieur Ciel, consider this 12,000 verl d'or an advance."
"Sure." Lumian didn't concern himself with the details; he simply

wanted the 12,000 verl d'or!
After securing the cash in a cloth bag, Lumian let out a silent sigh of relief.
He had nearly gathered the required 30,000 verl d'or to purchase the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic. Now, all he had to do was await news of the supplementary ingredients!
Currently, he possessed a total of 26,710 verl d'or. With an additional 6,000 from the Harvest Sacrifice, he would have enough.
As Lumian, laden with a significant amount of cash, left Salle de Bal Brise, a sense of unease suddenly washed over him.
He wasn't afraid of being robbed; rather, he worried that a conflict might damage the money bag or tear the banknotes.
I must find a safe place for it. I can't keep carrying it like this... Lumian strolled along Avenue du Marché, contemplating transferring the funds to the safe house.
Before long, his eyes caught sight of the brightly illuminated office belonging to the market district's member of parliament.
It stood as a classic four-story building, boasting a khaki-colored façade with statues adorning the top two floors—a Sunbird and Giant Gears.
The celebration banquet is still underway... Lumian shook his head disapprovingly.
Pausing for a moment, he settled in the shadows across the street, observing the departing guests from the banquet hall.
Hugues Artois, who enjoyed the combined support of the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob, not to mention Lady Moon's praise, was undoubtedly a man of influence. Some of the guests he had invited could very well be problematic individuals connected to the schemes of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
As time went by, an increasing number of guests emerged from the member of parliament's office. Lumian found no one who aroused suspicion. He could only confirm that most of them belonged to the upper echelons of society. They were elegantly attired, and their faces had graced the pages of various newspapers.
Suddenly, a familiar figure caught his eye.
It was Gardner Martin, an amiable man with chubby cheeks, a few silver strands of hair at his temples, and brownish-red eyes!
Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob!
Dressed in a tailcoat and a dark bow tie, Gardner seemed to sense something. He abruptly turned his head, fixing his gaze on the shadowy spot where Lumian sat.
Lumian's heart skipped a beat.
His thoughts raced, and he swiftly made up his mind. Rising to his

feet, he approached Gardner Martin.
Gardner Martin regarded him with a penetrating stare, revealing no trace of emotion.
"Good evening, Boss," Lumian greeted as he drew nearer.
Gardner Martin asked nonchalantly, "What brings you here?"
Lumian replied candidly, "I left Salle de Bal Brise and noticed that the member of parliament's office banquet was still ongoing. I thought I'd check which guests Monsieur Hugues Artois had invited, so as to avoid offending the wrong people in the future."
Gardner Martin nodded subtly and spoke calmly, "That's a commendable habit."
With a gesture signaling Lumian to depart, he proceeded towards a private carriage, accompanied by Butler Faustino.
Lumian's heart stirred as he followed suit, taking the initiative to speak, "Boss, I took an advance of 12,000 verl d'or from the dance hall today."

Chapter 234: Sincerity

Gardner Martin's brows lifted in surprise as he cast a curious glance at Lumian, taking a moment to ponder the situation.

"Let's converse inside the carriage."

Upon hearing this, Butler Faustino took the initiative to settle himself in the front of the carriage, right beside the driver.

Silently, Lumian trailed behind Gardner Martin and entered the carriage, taking a seat opposite him.

As the carriage slowly set in motion, Gardner Martin fixed his gaze upon Lumian and spoke up.

"Why did you advance such a hefty sum of cash?"

Lumian responded with candor.

"Given the opportunity to enhance my strength, I aspire to become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac."

Gardner Martin hadn't anticipated Lumian's straightforwardness. After a brief pause, he smiled and inquired, "Is 12,000 verl d'or sufficient?"

Lumian didn't bat an eye as he replied, "In addition to the 18,000 verl d'or you provided last time and my previous savings."

Gardner Martin nodded slowly.

"Did you come across anyone selling the main ingredient for the Pyromaniac potion elsewhere? And do you possess the formula for the potion?"

"Yes," Lumian confessed without reservation.

Gardner Martin chuckled.

"You've divulged all of this to me. Shouldn't these matters be kept secret?"

Lumian displayed an unusual sincerity as he responded, "I feel prepared to consume the Pyromaniac potion. It won't be long before I advance to Sequence 7.

"When that happens, if a conflict arises, concealing the change in my strength would be impossible. Boss, you'll soon discover it anyway. So why not tell you now?"

Furthermore, René, the manager of the dance hall, worked under Gardner Martin. He would undoubtedly report the 12,000 verl d'or advancement.

Lumian paused momentarily before continuing, "That's one reason.

"Another reason is that I've lived on the streets, endured rural life, and faced persecution. Now, I adhere to a single principle: I treat those who treat me well."

He wasn't attempting to flaunt his loyalty. According to Jenna, such exaggerated loyalty would seem untrustworthy, especially

when he had only met Gardner Martin once. His main goal was to convey his allegiance.
Similarly, Gardner Martin would definitely comprehend the underlying purpose behind Lumian's frankness. It was a display of his astuteness.
Gardner Martin lifted his head and burst into laughter.
"Very good.
"Brignais, Christo, and the others have their own secrets. They assume I'm oblivious.
"The fact that you can accurately grasp your situation, your future progress, and my stance indicates that you're more astute than them. Most times, sincerity proves to be the most effective approach."
Sincerity? Lumian seized the opportunity to express himself with an extraordinary sincerity.
"Boss, I have leads on the main ingredient, but I'm unsure where to acquire the supplementary ingredients.
"Could you keep an eye out for Fire Salamander's blood, Magma Pyroxene powder, and Redcrown Balsam?"
From Lumian's perspective, Gardner Martin, suspected to be a Sequence 6 or perhaps even a Sequence 5 Beyonder of the Hunter pathway, would have an easier time finding the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion compared to Franca.
Perhaps he still possessed leftover supplementary ingredients from advancing to Pyromaniac?
According to Aurore's grimoire, spiritual supplementary ingredients could be preserved for an extended period if the method was correct.
Gardner Martin was taken aback. He hadn't anticipated Ciel making such a direct request.
Initially, he had intended to inquire about a few matters of concern and understand Lumian's needs before offering assistance to win him over.
After a brief pause, Gardner Martin nodded and responded, "No problem."
Observing that Gardner Martin didn't inquire about the quantities of the three supplementary ingredients, Lumian grew increasingly convinced that the Savoie Mob boss was a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway.
Gardner Martin peered out of the window and spoke inquisitively.
"While you were observing the parliament member's office, did you notice anything suspicious?"
"No," Lumian shook his head. "They're just individuals whose pictures occasionally appear in the newspapers."

Gardner Martin smiled nonchalantly.
"Indeed, there's the president and vice-president of our Savoie Chamber of Commerce; Bono Goodville, the owner of Goodville Chemical Factory; Clement, the manager of Nova Mechanical Prosthetics; and Etienne from Saint-Ger Phlogiston Factory... I was invited as a shareholder of Rist Docks and the head of Rist Shipping Company and Savoie Construction Company, not as the boss of the Savoie Mob."
Gardner Martin let out a soft sigh.
"However, we can barely squeeze into Trier's high society. In the business world, the true heavyweights are the chairmen and proprietors of Trier Bank, Suchit Bank, and Asset Credit Bank. They are the shareholders of behemoths like Suhit Textile Group, Tilisi Coal and Steel Consortium, Anubi Steel Company, Southern Liquor Merchants Federation, Falgar Weapons Group, and Balam-Paz Import and Export Corporation."
Lumian had come across these names in newspapers and magazines. The company that had left the deepest impression was Balam-Paz Import and Export Corporation.
To protect their interests in the West Balam and Paz Valley of the Southern Continent, they had even been allowed to finance a substantial private army and a fleet as mercenaries.
Noticing that the carriage was about to depart from Avenue du Marché, Gardner Martin signaled the driver to halt and nodded at Lumian.
"Before consuming the potion, ensure your condition is favorable. It's better to delay than to take unnecessary risks."
After acknowledging Gardner Martin's advice, Lumian left the carriage and headed towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.
He intended to conceal all his cash within the confines of the safe house.
After walking a certain distance, Lumian hesitated.
Safe houses didn't guarantee absolute safety, especially in lower-class areas like the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique, where the population was denser. Thieves ran rampant in such places.
If a burglar were to stumble upon Aurore's grimoires, they would be of little value to them. At most, they would search through them in the hopes of finding hidden banknotes, but the sum of over 26,000 cash would undoubtedly be taken.
Should I set up a few traps in the safe house to deter thieves? Lumian's thoughts raced, and suddenly, a better idea struck him.
That idea was to provide Madam Magician with an advance payment of 26,000 verl d'or!

This way, there would be no risk of losing such a large sum of cash.
Furthermore, a lofty individual like Madam Magician would not deny accepting the advance payment.
Phew... With his mind made up, Lumian arrived at the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches and retrieved pen and paper to write a letter.
"Esteemed Madam Magician,
"I have already procured 26,000 verl d'or. I will offer this as an advance payment. Once I gather the remaining 4,000, you may send me the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.
"Looking forward to your reply."
Lumian refrained from requesting Madam Magician to grant him the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic immediately, as he had yet to acquire the corresponding supplementary ingredients. Preserving Beyonder characteristics proved to be quite troublesome, and there was a risk of losing them.
After summoning the puppet messenger and entrusting it with the cloth bag containing cash and coins, along with the letter, Lumian felt a significant sense of relief. However, he couldn't help but worry that the messenger might fall victim to robbery in the spirit world.
Before long, the puppet messenger adorned in a golden dress returned with a reply from Madam Magician.
"26,000 verl d'or has been received.
"Magician."
It's akin to receiving a receipt... Lumian murmured to himself, expressing gratitude to the puppet messenger.
He then departed Rue des Blouses Blanches and made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.
As was his routine, Lumian used a short wire to open the door, quietly traversed the dimly lit lobby with only the basement bar's glow, and ascended the stairs.
Reaching the second floor, he pursed his lips and continued upwards to the third floor, arriving at Room 310, where Flameng had once resided.
The wooden door to the room stood ajar, and the curtains remained undrawn, allowing the crimson moonlight to filter through the glass.
It was an unwritten folklore often believed by the lower-class citizens of Trier:
In a room where someone had met their demise, the door had to be left open and the curtains undrawn for three days.
This was done out of concern that the ghost of the deceased might

be reluctant to depart.
Lumian stood at the doorway, gazing into the empty room, as if he could see the madman clutching his head and whispering, "I'm dying."
After a while, he silently averted his gaze and proceeded towards the stairs.
As he approached the staircase, he overheard a conversation emanating from Room 302, despite their attempts to suppress their voices.
The room belonged to Ruhr and Michel, the sellers of counterfeit photographs who worked as part-time scavengers.
There was no sign of a kerosene or carbide lamp being lit within the room. No light seeped through the crack in the door.
Lumian's acute hearing allowed him to instinctively tune in to the discussion between the elderly couple.
"Old Woman, look at these. They're worth a fortune! Those gentlemen and ladies simply discarded them!"
"I reckon this bag alone could fetch 5 verl d'or..."
"5 verl d'or? It's worth at least 15!"
"Old Man, if only we could stumble upon such valuable rubbish every day."
"Then we'd have to vote for a member of parliament every day."
"Praise the Sun. Let that member of parliament host a banquet every day. In that case, we could return to Aurmir and purchase 10 acres of fields to cultivate grapes within a year."
"You're quite the dreamer, Old Woman.
"What's wrong with dreaming? Don't you dream? Even without the banquet, we've managed to save up a significant sum. Another four or five years should suffice."
"True. When the time comes, we won't have to toil as hard as we do now, and we won't need to worry about being unable to work..."
Lumian ceased eavesdropping and silently chuckled. Descending the stairs, he returned to Room 207, briefly freshened up, and climbed into bed.
In the midst of the night, half-asleep, he was suddenly startled by hurried footsteps.
As he sat up and glanced towards the corridor, there came a knock on his door.
Lumian, feeling a mix of wariness and confusion, approached the wooden door and opened it.
Standing outside was Madame Michel, the short, gray-haired woman adorned in a yellow cloth dress.
She spoke with fear and panic, "Ruhr has taken ill suddenly! Ciel—Monsieur Ciel, can you assist me in carrying him to the clinic on

Rue des Blouses Blanches?
"I-I have the money for his treatment!"
Monsieur Ruhr is unwell? He was perfectly fine when I fell asleep... Lumian was taken aback.

Chapter 235: "Disease"

Observing Lumian's silence, Michel spoke with anxiety creeping into her voice.

"If you're not willing, I can find someone else."

"Who should I look for... They don't really like us. They can't stand our foul odor..."

That was precisely why she sought out Lumian, a leader of the mob. Lumian and Charlie were the only ones at Auberge du Coq Doré who could calmly communicate with the couple, but Charlie had already left.

Glancing at the short and hunched figure of Madame Michel, Lumian let out a sigh and responded.

"I'll go and check it out."

Still perplexed, he walked past Madame Michel, hastened up to the second floor, and entered Room 302.

The place was filled with various kinds of rubbish, emitting an indescribable stench. Lumian raised his hand, pinching his nose, and maneuvered his way through the cramped space, barely fitting a single person, until he reached the yellowish and greasy bedsheet.

Ruhr, with his wrinkled eyes tightly shut, lay on the bed, his face flushed and his breath ragged. He had fainted.

He's seriously ill... Lumian furrowed his brow, holding his breath. He turned around and carried Ruhr out of the room.

Meanwhile, Michel swiftly rummaged through the piles of trash, uncovering hidden spots with single banknotes and coins, which she promptly concealed on her person.

Soon, they left Room 302. As Michel locked the door, she spoke to Lumian.

"Monsieur Ciel, pay me no mind. Send Ruhr to the clinic without me. I'll catch up."

Lumian nodded, quickened his pace, and sprinted out of Auberge du Coq Doré.

He was familiar with Rue des Blouses Blanches' clinics, often frequenting the area. After a short sprint, he spotted the Roblin Clinic, a small hospital in all but name.

Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman and Quartier de Noël had been neighboring districts for some time now. The Holy Palace Hospital, funded by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, was located across the bridge. As a result, only a few clinics were situated on this side of the bridge.

Roblin Clinic had two doctors on duty during the night. Temporary beds were set up in the spacious hall, with a few patients lying on

them, receiving infusion treatments.
Lumian carried Ruhr to one of the doctors and gently placed him on a treatment bed.
The doctor, donning gold-rimmed glasses and in his early thirties, glanced at Lumian. Without directly mentioning any consultation fees, he disdainfully examined Ruhr's condition.
After a few minutes, he adjusted his glasses and spoke.
"He's running a high fever, but there don't appear to be any other symptoms. I suggest we try to bring down the fever first. If it persists, we should immediately transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital."
"Alright." Lumian possessed limited medical knowledge, so he could only heed the doctor's advice.
The doctor swiftly wrote a prescription for Lumian and instructed him to make the necessary payment. Lumian complied, receiving the fever medicine and infusion drip from the pharmacy.
The Fool Pharmaceutical Company's Type 1357 Fever Medicine...
Lumian glanced at the prescription's contents and then proceeded to the payment window.
Madame Michel finally arrived, panting and exhausted.
She accepted the prescription from Lumian and glanced at the price. In a burst of frustration, she exclaimed, "It's 5 verl d'or..."
Without waiting for Lumian's response, she clenched her teeth and retrieved copper and silver coins. She gathered 5 verl d'or and paid the consultation fee.
Before long, Ruhr was carried to a temporary bed for the infusion.
This treatment had gained popularity only in recent years.
Madame Michel finally regained her composure and spoke to Lumian.
"Thank you, Monsieur Ciel. You can go back and rest. I'll stay with Ruhr."
Lumian didn't insist. After all, he wasn't a doctor.
He nodded slightly and directed his gaze towards Ruhr. Concentrating, he intended to check on his luck.
Lumian couldn't help but furrow his brow.
Monsieur Ruhr was on the brink of death!
However, it wasn't severe or evident. Unlike the previous vagrant, there seemed to be a chance of salvation.
Just as Lumian was about to suggest transferring him to the Holy Palace Hospital, Ruhr's condition took a turn.
Translucent blisters resembling burns emerged on his skin. They swiftly filled with light yellow pus, exhibiting signs of festering.
Such symptoms, such progression, and such rapid evolution caused Lumian's pupils to contract. His intuition informed him

that this was no ordinary illness.
Perhaps it was connected to mysticism and supernatural forces!
Monsieur Ruhr is merely a scavenger. Why is he affected by supernatural powers? Lumian raised his head and pointed at the unconscious Ruhr. He addressed Madame Michel, "You're believers of the Eternal Blazing Sun, correct? Take him to the Église Saint-Robert and give it a try."
He sensed that the Holy Palace Hospital might not be equipped to treat an illness involving supernatural powers. It would be better to visit the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and determine if purification could eliminate the effects.
Madame Michel noticed her husband's peculiar transformation and pleaded with a sobbing tone, "No, transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital! Transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital!"
To Madame Michel's understanding, seeking blessings at the cathedral was akin to giving up on treatment and preparing for the solace of a deathbed.
Lumian refrained from persuading her, realizing that it was the dead of night and Église Saint-Robert had long closed its doors. Moreover, Ruhr and Michel were nothing more than a couple of scavengers, so the chances of the cathedral opening for them were slim.
Additionally, Église Saint-Robert was quite far away. Ruhr's condition was rapidly deteriorating, and he might not survive the journey, let alone live long enough to rouse the cathedral's caretakers to unlock the door.
Lumian observed Ruhr, whose blisters had burst and were now oozing pus. After a brief moment of silence, he spoke to Madame Michel, "Find a doctor and transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital immediately."
"Alright, alright!" Michel snapped out of her daze and hurriedly approached the doctor who had attended to Ruhr.
Once she vacated the temporary bed, Lumian positioned himself to block the view of the other patients. From his pocket, he retrieved an iron-colored metal canister adorned with a spring fountain pattern.
This was the Healing Agent he had obtained from "Baldy" Harman!
Lumian believed that ailments as a result of mysticism could only be countered by mysticism remedies. Although uncertain whether this agent, primarily meant for external injuries, would work on Ruhr, he was determined to give it a shot.
Unscrewing the cap, he pinched Ruhr's mouth open and forced down half of the agent.
Ruhr, seemingly parched, instinctively swallowed the clear liquid

resembling a refreshing spring.
After two gulps, he began to calm down.
In less than a minute, Madame Michel returned with the doctor. The blisters on Ruhr's face shriveled, scabbed over, and silently fell away.
It actually worked... Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and focused on observing the shifts in Ruhr's fate.
This time, there were no signs of impending death. Ruhr's destiny for the next few days appeared somewhat chaotic, making it difficult for Lumian to decipher or speculate upon.
Perplexed, the doctor glanced at Ruhr and asked Madame Michel, "Isn't he in pretty good shape?"
Madame Michel also noticed that the dreadful blisters that had marred her husband's face were now gone, leaving behind only scars and wrinkles. His breathing had steadied and was no longer labored.
"I apologize for my anxiety," she quickly apologized.
The doctor, irritated by the stench emanating from her and Ruhr, waved his hand dismissively.
"The Fool Pharmaceutical Company's medications are far more effective than others. Since the situation has improved, keep a close eye on him. Don't rush to transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital."
With that, he hastily departed from the temporary bed.
Madame Michel slumped down next to Ruhr, occasionally checking his forehead to gauge his body temperature.
Lumian remained by their side. He pulled up a stool and sat, attentively observing Ruhr's condition.
Ten minutes later, Ruhr opened his eyes and gazed blankly at the unfamiliar white ceiling.
"Where am I?"
Michel let out a sigh of relief and swiftly recounted his sudden illness.
"Why did I fall ill out of the blue?" Ruhr was bewildered. "I felt perfectly fine before going to bed."
Interrupting their conversation, Lumian casually inquired, "What did you do before bed that was different from your usual routine?"
"Nothing," Ruhr pondered for a moment before replying, "Just the usual routine. I sorted through the trash I collected, went to the washroom, had a chat, and then went to sleep... Maybe I came back late last night. It was nearly one o'clock by the time I finished sorting. I guess I ended up sleeping too late..."
Could there be something amiss with the garbage? Or did something occur during the day that only manifested in the dead

of night? Lumian delved deeper, hoping for valuable clues from Ruhr and Michel, but alas, his efforts proved fruitless.
Ruhr recuperated swiftly. Once the IV had been administered, he insisted on leaving the Roblin Clinic immediately, unwilling to spend any more money and determined to return to the motel before dawn.
Observing that Ruhr's luck remained unchanged, Lumian didn't try to dissuade him.
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 302.
Lumian furrowed his brow, surveying the piles of garbage emitting various odors, hoping to pinpoint the problematic one. Ruhr and Michel stood beside him, expressing their gratitude incessantly.
Given the peculiar environment, his sense of smell proved useless. Lumian activated his Spirit Vision and observed for a while, yet found no clues.
He could only say to Ruhr and Michel, "We can't rule out the possibility that there might be something contaminated in this trash that caused your illness. Sleep in a different room tonight and wait until morning."
Lumian intended to seek the assistance of Franca, a skilled Witch in divination, once she awoke, in order to identify the source of the problem.
Before Ruhr could respond, Michel, terrified by her husband's sudden illness and brush with death, spoke up.
"Alright! Thank you, Monsieur Ciel."
Two vacant rooms were available on the third floor. Lumian arranged for Ruhr and Michel to rest in Room 307.
It was already past four in the morning. Lumian returned to Room 207 and lay on the bed, contemplating the reason behind the strange occurrence. Gradually, he drifted off into a dazed slumber.
Suddenly, he jolted awake, barely catching a glimpse of a woman's anguished cry.
Lumian's heart tightened as he grabbed Fallen Mercury and left the room. Following the sound of the wailing, he ascended to the third floor.
In the darkness, his heart sank as he slowed his pace, filled with trepidation.
Finally, he halted outside Room 307. In the crimson moonlight that filtered through the curtains, he spotted Madame Michel kneeling before the bed, weeping uncontrollably.
Sensing his approach, Michel, clad in a yellow gown, turned her tear-streaked face in the dimness and directed her gaze towards the door.
Her voice hollow, she uttered, "Ciel—Monsieur Ciel, Ruhr is dead..."

Chapter 236: Morning Light

He's dead... Lumian thought, his heart heavy with the news he had anticipated but couldn't fully accept.

Leaving the clinic, Ruhr had appeared to have recovered, escaping the clutches of death. *How could he have died so suddenly?*

With a heavy heart, Lumian stepped into Room 307, fixing his gaze upon the bed.

There lay Ruhr, his body plagued by festering wounds that oozed a faint yellow pus. His complexion was pale and sickly, and he lay completely still.

Ruhr's eyes were wide open, and there was evidence of vomit around his mouth.

After a few moments of silently studying Ruhr's dazed, pained eyes, Lumian spoke in a deep voice, "When did he pass away?"

Michel, her white hair now devoid of its usual luster, slowly shook her head and replied, "I was exhausted and fell asleep. When I awoke, he was already gone..."

"Did he return to Room 302 before bedtime?" Lumian inquired, pressing for details.

"No, he only went to the washroom near Room 302. I followed him..." Michel's voice carried a deep timbre, but it gave Lumian an otherworldly sensation, as though a part of her soul had left her body.

They had all visited the washroom. One fell victim to the strange ailment, while the other remained unscathed... Lumian furrowed his brow, determined to investigate the washroom.

If nothing seems amiss there, the likelihood of Madame Michel being abnormal becomes increasingly probable!

As Lumian departed from Room 307, heading toward the designated washroom, Michel remained kneeling by the bed, quietly weeping, unaware of the other's movements.

The third-floor restroom was no longer as filthy as before, thanks to the regular cleaning ladies. Although some stains and trash were unavoidable after a day's use, it was still passable for civilized individuals.

Lumian glanced around, taking in the sight of the toilet bowl and sink illuminated by the moon's crimson glow streaming through the window. He noticed the rusty tap and mirror, reflecting his own image.

After careful observation, he noticed a white silk handkerchief draped over a pipe in a hidden corner.

Even with a casual glance, Lumian could tell that it didn't belong to any of the current residents of Auberge du Coq Doré. The fabric

was of superior quality, adorned with elegant embroidery—a clear sign of its expense.
An outsider, perhaps? Lumian's initial instinct was to pick up the silk handkerchief and examine it more closely. However, he quickly reminded himself of the sight of Monsieur Ruhr's festering body when he had fallen ill and forced himself to restrain his impulses.
Lumian's mind raced as he left the washroom and returned to Room 307. He approached Madame Michel, who was still sobbing, and inquired, "Do you know who the handkerchief in the washroom belongs to?"
Confused and filled with sorrow, Michel instinctively replied, "It's Ruhr's."
Monsieur Ruhr's? Lumian was both surprised and convinced.
He pressed further, "Where did it come from?"
Madame Michel gazed at Ruhr's grotesque, lifeless form and spoke dreamily, "It was among the trash we collected tonight. I wonder which gentleman or lady discarded it...
"It had phlegm on it but was undamaged. Ruhr cleaned it and intended to sell it second-hand instead of throwing it away...
"After you mentioned the possibility of something unclean in the trash, Ruhr took it out and hid it in the washroom. He didn't dare to return to Room 302..."
Phlegm... Lumian felt he had discovered the root of the problem.
He let out a slow exhale and said, "Did Monsieur Ruhr touch the handkerchief again? Did you?"
"I don't know..." Madame Michel shook her head slowly. "He went to the washroom by himself. I didn't touch it..."
As expected... Lumian retrieved his gloves and put them on. He returned to the washroom and used Fallen Mercury to lift the white silk handkerchief. He carefully placed it in the white paper he had with him, folding it neatly.
Throughout the process, he made sure not to touch the handkerchief directly.
Afterward, Lumian wiped Fallen Mercury's blade with another piece of white paper and tossed the crumpled ball into the toilet bowl. He waited for it to soften and then flushed it away.
Stepping out of the washroom, he noticed Madame Michel standing silently by the door of Room 307, like a ghost wandering in the darkness.
As Lumian approached her, the old lady with white hair wore a pleading expression.
"It's almost dawn, Monsieur Ciel. Could you help me move Ruhr back to Room 302?"

Her voice still held a dreamy quality.
Lumian was taken aback. After a brief pause of five or six seconds, he replied, "Okay."
He entered Room 307 and carefully wrapped Monsieur Ruhr's body in the bedsheets, hoisting him onto his back.
With just a few steps, Lumian carried the lifeless form and placed it on the bed in Room 302.
Madame Michel, having squeezed through the trash, expressed her profuse gratitude before striding towards the wooden table and drawing back the curtains.
It was almost 6 a.m. As the first rays of dawn broke through the sky, dimming the crimson moonlight, Michel listened to the vendors outside the motel and fixated her gaze on Ruhr.
Lumian retreated from Room 302 and returned to the corridor, stepping out of the reach of the light. He leaned silently against the wall, not disturbing the serene scene.
After a few minutes, Madame Michel suddenly sprang into action.
She rummaged through the room, finding more banknotes and coins. Then, she hastened out of the room and descended downstairs.
Lumian didn't follow. He raised his right foot to the wall and leaned against the sleeping darkness of the wall.
As time passed, Madame Michel returned with an abundance of items.
There was a bottle of red wine, grilled cod, cured meat, meatloaf, soybean paste, hot sauce, and apples.
Without sparing a glance for Lumian, Madame Michel entered Room 302. She collapsed onto the bed and placed the food beside the decaying corpse.
After a moment's contemplation, she rose again and ignited the carbide lamp on the wooden table, filling the room with its glow.
Madame Michel once again lowered herself to the floor, picked up the meatloaf, and brought it to Ruhr's mouth. Smiling, she uttered, "Haven't you been craving meatloaf lately? I bought it for you today."
After allowing some of the oil to moisten the corpse's lips, Madame Michel took a bite of the meatloaf and savored it with closed eyes.
"It's delicious. How long has it been since we last ate? Two weeks, right?"
Having taken a few more bites of the meatloaf, Madame Michel seized the bottle of red wine and took a swig.
Mumbling, she continued, "Old Man, our vines have produced red wine. We needn't worry about what the future holds!"
Engaging in one-sided conversation with Ruhr's lifeless body, she

continued to indulge in wine and various delicacies.
Outside the door, Lumian remained in the darkness, leaning against the wall as he silently observed the unfolding scene. He neither entered nor departed.
Soon enough, Madame Michel began to feel the effects of her intoxication. As a former barmaid, she began to sing loudly:
"Trier, a city dressed in gold,
"A ball that endures 'til dawn unfolds;
"Chicken roasted, dripping with oil's grace,
"A castle cake to fill each eager embrace.
"A bow-tied attendant glides 'mongst the guests,
"Merrily dancing with joy and delight.
"My beloved, hidden 'midst the crowd,
"Among them, a beacon shining bright.
"Among them, my love resides,
"In the Capital of Joy, forever Trier!"
Madame Michel rose unsteadily and stumbled towards the wooden table, gathering the banknotes in front of the carbide lamp.
In an instant, the cash caught fire and flames erupted on the table, emitting a bright yellow glow.
With her arms outstretched, Madame Michel shouted, "In the Capital of Joy, forever Trier!"
She retrieved the rope that had once bound the sack and climbed onto the wooden table, tying the rope firmly to the window frame with a tight knot.
In the flickering light of the fire, Madame Michel turned to face Ruhr, lying motionless on the bed. She positioned the knot around her neck and bent her legs.
The knot tightened, and Madame Michel's eyes bulged in her struggle for breath.
Outside the window, the sky grew brighter, casting a faint light that bathed a portion of the corridor. Lumian leaned against the wall, concealed in the shadows. With his hands in his pockets and his right foot propped up, he gazed impassively at Madame Michel, suspended from the window frame. He witnessed her mouth gradually open, her expression contort in pain, and her bent legs letting up upon her demise.
In the morning light, the corpse swayed gently.
...
At 6:35 a.m., 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601.
Startled by the knocks on the door, Franca, her flaxen hair disheveled, wore a bitter expression as she rose from her slumber.
"I've only had three hours of sleep. Three hours!"

"Help me inspect the contents for any anomalies." Lumian ignored Franca's complaints and presented the handkerchief wrapped in white paper. "Be cautious. It might be infectious."
"Infectious?" Franca snapped out of her daze and retreated to her room, donning translucent, pale-yellow rubber gloves.
She carefully unwrapped the outer layer of paper, extracted the silk handkerchief within, and placed it on the glass coffee table.
Tapping her teeth while observing intently, Franca spoke with a solemn expression,
"There is indeed an issue. There are numerous small but active spirits lingering on it. They belong to the same category.
"I suspect it's a pathogen. It spreads through direct contact with the skin or even blood exchange. Based on your description, it's not highly contagious."
Although Lumian didn't comprehend the concept of a pathogen fully, he grasped the essence of Franca's explanation.
He fell into silence momentarily before saying, "Can you determine the owner of this handkerchief?"
"No problem. With a powerful medium present, as long as they don't possess strong anti-divination abilities, I can locate them." As Franca spoke, black flames flickered on her rubber gloves.
After "cleansing" the area, she removed her gloves and retrieved a makeup mirror. Hovering her left palm over the handkerchief, she stroked the mirror with her right hand.
Reciting a series of incantations in a hushed tone, her eyes darkened.
She repeated the divination statement.
"The owner of this handkerchief.
"The owner of this handkerchief..."
After several repetitions, the mirror emitted an aqueous glow, reflecting a figure in the darkness.
It was a slender young man with a pale complexion and an unhealthy appearance.
His curly dark-yellow hair framed his face, and his brown eyes conveyed an unmasked indifference. Clad in a black tailcoat, he clutched a white silk handkerchief. He coughed twice and expectorated into the fabric.
Lumian strained to capture the person's features, feeling a sense of familiarity wash over him. It was as if he had encountered this individual somewhere before.
After a brief recollection, it dawned on him.
This was a member of Hugues Artois's campaign team, the one who stood behind the red-haired woman!

Chapter 237: Concealment

"So? Do you know him?" Franca glanced at Lumian, seeking his insight.

Lumian shifted his gaze away from the mirror, its reflection gradually fading, and spoke with a deep voice, "He's one of Hugues Artois's men. I spotted him during the campaign."

Franca furrowed her brow, closing her makeup mirror and inquiring, "What happened?"

Lumian recounted the encounter between Ruhr and Michel, concluding, "There's something suspicious about this man."

Franca sighed, remarking, "They're already in such dire straits as scavengers, and yet they still have to face such a situation..."

She scoffed, adding, "Considering Lady Moon's endorsement of Hugues Artois as an open-minded individual, it wouldn't surprise me if he surrounds himself with peculiar characters."

Pausing to look at Lumian, Franca continued, "Hugues Artois is now a member of parliament. He'll have both visible and covert protection. If we make a move against him or his associates, we'll easily be tracked down. The consequences would be severe."

"Let's entrust this matter to the official Beyonders for further investigation. I can't guarantee much else. At the very least, the Inquisition's Purifiers and members of the Machinery Hivemind won't turn a blind eye to such affairs. They will find a way to uncover the truth and assess the situation," Franca suggested.

Lumian nodded slowly and inquired, "Then which Sequence or pathway could it be? Can phlegm transmit such a deadly disease?"

As he made his way from Auberge du Coq Doré to Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian diligently recalled the twenty-two paths of the divine detailed in Aurore's grimoires but found no match for the current circumstances.

Franca pondered deeply and said, "My understanding of the twenty-two paths of the divine is similar to your sister's, but I have a more comprehensive knowledge of certain aspects. I can only think of one pathway that fits the criteria, but it's of a higher level and exclusive to women. It doesn't align with the target's situation."

"Hmm... Considering we've encountered the Great Mother and the Blessed of the Mother Tree of Desire, could our target be someone blessed by another evil deity?"

"Heh heh, if it truly involves the faith of an evil god, the Beyonders from both Churches will undoubtedly intensify their efforts."

"Yes, Ruhr's death is peculiar indeed. As long as the investigating police aren't blind, they'll swiftly report it to their superiors, who

will assign someone capable to handle the case."
Lumian acknowledged her words briefly, his expression softening. After bidding farewell to Franca, he made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.
As he walked past the reception desk, Madame Fels rose to her feet, a mix of fear and flattery evident in her voice as she greeted, "Good morning, Monsieur Ciel."
A few days ago, the police had informed her that Monsieur Ive was believed to be involved in a cult and had become a wanted criminal. They had requested her to use the rental income to cover expenses and ensure the motel's smooth operation during this period. Additionally, they wanted her to keep a record of the accounts. Once the elections were over, they would settle the matter of Auberge du Coq Doré's ownership promptly.
Madame Fels felt uneasy, fearing that the new boss would dismiss her. Subconsciously, she tried to win Ciel's favor, hoping that a leader of the Savoie Mob would stand up for her when the time came. Whoever took control of Auberge du Coq Doré would not want to offend the corresponding mob, unless they had influential connections.
"Good morning," Lumian replied simply. He walked along the wall, covered in newspapers and pink paper to conceal stains, cracks, and bedbugs, making his way up to the third floor.
He had locked the door to Room 302 before the other tenants on the third floor had awakened, so as of yet, no one had discovered the lifeless bodies of Ruhr and Michel.
Madame Michel's singing before she took her own life had failed to disturb the neighbors. To those residing on Rue Anarchie, various noises during the night were commonplace. Singing, gunshots, brawls, shouting, and sporting activities were nothing worth paying attention to.
Lumian returned the silk handkerchief to its hidden spot in the washroom before pausing in front of Room 302. Extending his left hand clad in a black glove, he turned the handle and opened the creaking wooden door.
Madame Michel's lifeless form hung silently in the room. The aroma of food mingled with the surrounding stench of garbage, filling the space as the light grew brighter.
Lumian gazed at the scene for over ten seconds before slowly turning away, preparing to leave.
...
It was nearly eight o'clock when the two police officers arrived at Auberge du Coq Doré. They spotted Lumian, who had disguised himself using the Mystery Prying Glasses.

"Why is there another death?" grumbled the officer who had previously interrogated Lumian.
His face was rugged, lacking in handsome features, and bore the marks of age.
Lumian responded calmly, "One died of illness. I'm no doctor, unable to save him."
"And the other one?" the officer pressed for more information.
Lumian replied honestly, "She took her own life after the blow."
The older-looking policeman furrowed his brow and entered Room 302, accompanied by his partner.
The first sight that greeted them was Madame Michel's lifeless body hanging from the window frame. The officer instinctively covered his nose.
The place was far too filthy and foul-smelling!
Next, his gaze fell upon Ruhr's decaying corpse, observing the putrefying flesh and spilled blood.
"Son of a bitch, you call this an illness?" he couldn't help but turn to Lumian, his eyes filled with shock and fear.
Lumian briefly recounted the events of the previous night, omitting the fact that Ruhr's condition had worsened while he was at Roblin Clinic and had been revived by half a bottle of Healing Agent. Lumian attributed the credit to The Fool Pharmaceuticals' fever-reducing medicine.
He also mentioned his suspicion that the Ruhrs had encountered an infectious source within the pile of garbage they had collected the previous night, causing them to sleep in Room 307. Lumian brought up Madame Michel's mention of a silk handkerchief in the washroom as well.
The more the two officers listened, the quieter they became, their expressions slightly off.
After Lumian finished speaking, they hurried to the washroom to confirm the presence of the silk handkerchief.
The older-looking officer glanced at Ciel outside and whispered to his partner, "Another mysticism incident. Stay here and guard the scene. I'll report the situation."
The other officer nodded.
"No problem."
Lumian observed as they divided the tasks, patiently awaiting the arrival of the official Beyonders.
In less than half an hour, the older-looking policeman returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, alone.
Where are the official Beyonders? Lumian's eyes widened in surprise.
The older-looking policeman avoided Lumian's gaze and pulled his

partner to the end of the corridor, engaging in a hushed conversation.
Lumian stood at a distance, straining his ears to catch their words, but they remained unintelligible.
After a while, the older-looking officer approached Lumian, his expression grave.
"We've preliminarily determined it as death due to illness and suicide."
No further investigation? Lumian's eyebrows twitched in disbelief.
The officer repeated what he had said when they had taken Flameng's body away. He donned gloves, carefully placed the silk handkerchief into a cloth bag, and secured it tightly.
Lumian silently observed as they removed the corpses, wrapped Ruhr's body, and placed him in a body bag. Numerous thoughts raced through his mind.
Even though he died in such a manner, the official Beyonders don't find it suspicious? No need for further investigation?
Or perhaps the police officer didn't report the matter, and the official Beyonders remain unaware?
Could someone have intervened and persuaded them to treat this as an ordinary death case, not involving any criminal offense?
"..."
With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian quietly followed the officer carrying the two bodies to the carriage.
From a distance, he trailed them, detecting the lingering odor emanating from Ruhr's and Michel's bodies. He tracked them all the way to the entrance of the police headquarters in the market district.
Lumian furrowed his brow as he observed uniformed police officers entering and exiting the building.
His initial suspicion was that an officer from the police headquarters had halted the investigation, but he couldn't confirm the identity.
Even if he were to enter the police headquarters, given the circumstances and his own status, it would be impossible for him to trace their steps all the way to the relevant office. If he observed from outside, he wouldn't be able to discern who might be involved from the people coming out.
Lumian pondered the direction of his investigation once more.
Get Franca to use divination?
But there's no medium available...
Alternatively... *Why did the officer stop the investigation?* Was he aware that someone would be implicated, or had someone already alerted him to such matters beforehand?

If it's the latter, there's a high chance that he holds considerable influence within the parliamentarian's office...
Lumian's heart stirred as he left the entrance of the police headquarters and swiftly arrived outside the four-story khaki-colored building that housed the parliamentarian's office in the market district.
Taking cover in an alley across the street, he found himself in the company of a group of vagrants.
Before long, his eyes landed on an officer.
The officer was plump, in his early forties, with brown hair and blue eyes. Three-petaled silver-white sweet irises adorned his black epaulets.
This indicated that he was a chief inspector, one rank lower than a superintendent.
As Lumian watched the chief inspector enter the parliamentarian's office, a smile curled upon his lips.
...
In the khaki-colored four-story building, on the second floor...
Tybalt, his face pale and his hair curly and yellow, entered the office of the member of parliament's secretary.
The secretary, a man in his thirties with neatly combed back black hair and blue eyes hidden behind gold-rimmed glasses, possessed refined features and an air of sophistication.
He glanced at Tybalt, who was coughing, and tossed a cloth bag on the table. With a cold expression, he spoke, "We've recovered your handkerchief."
Tybalt, his dark-yellow hair curly, was attired in a black suit. He smiled and replied, "That was quick."
"You bastard!" the member of parliament's secretary cursed. "Do you not realize that your phlegm can spread diseases to others? Aren't you afraid of attracting the attention of the two Churches?"
Tybalt's brown eyes remained indifferent as he nonchalantly remarked, "At most, two or three commoners might die. No one would care about them. I've been sick for far too long without receiving a new boon. It frustrates me, and it makes me want to kill someone."
The member of parliament's secretary stared at him for a few seconds before admonishing in a deep voice, "If I hadn't taken precautions in advance, the Purifiers would have come looking for you. Your life is inconsequential. Don't jeopardize us! Tybalt, there will be no next time."
Tybalt shrugged, accepting the reprimand.

Chapter 238: Endure

Lumian sat in the alleyway across from the member of parliament's office, blending in with a group of tramps.

Having followed and observed carefully, he had pieced together the entire situation.

Within the office, someone had managed to find a reliable officer beforehand and instructed him to monitor cases of mysterious illnesses in their jurisdiction. This officer would keep things quiet, refraining from reporting to the corresponding official Beyonders. Furthermore, any evidence he discovered would be sent to the member of parliament's office.

This revelation implied that the sickly lad who had spat into the handkerchief and discarded it knew the consequences of his actions. As long as he kept his mouth shut, the member of parliament would never seek assistance from the police headquarters!

Lumian's gaze fixated on the khaki-colored four-story building. His hands unconsciously balled into fists, yet he restrained himself from taking any drastic measures.

After a while, he let out a slow exhale.

Just then, a familiar figure emerged from the door of the building that housed the member of parliament's office.

This man donned a silk top hat and wielded a dark cane. Clad in a sharp black suit, a thick brown beard adorned his mouth and chin. Deep wrinkles framed his dark-blue, almost black eyes.

It was Bono Goodville, the owner of Goodville Chemical Factory. He had left the celebratory banquet earlier than Gardner Martin—the boss of the Savoie Mob—the previous night. Occasionally, his photos would appear in certain newspaper reports.

Lumian averted his gaze and waited. Only when the chief inspector left the member of parliament's office unaccompanied and returned to the police headquarters did he rise from the alleyway teeming with tramps. He casually found a café and enjoyed a simple late breakfast.

Shortly before 11 a.m., he knocked on Franca's door once again.

"How did it go? Have the official Beyonders taken over?" Franca had already risen from bed and changed into her favorite white blouse and light-colored breeches.

Lumian shook his head. "No."

As he stepped into the apartment, he elaborated, "It was brushed under the carpet by a chief inspector from the police headquarters."

Franca comprehended the situation and couldn't help but scoff.

"Even the folks at the member of parliament's office recognize the problems of spitting anywhere!"
Lumian found a spot on the sofa and sat down. He recounted everything, from the moment the police arrived to investigate the scene until the chief inspector entered the member of parliament's office.
Franca peered into his eyes, contemplating for a few seconds before speaking up,
"I understand that you find it hard to accept and that a fire might be raging in your heart. I truly empathize with you. Though that couple had no relation to you, you tried your utmost to save them, only to meet with failure. Many people can sympathize with such tragic encounters.
"But I must insist, be patient, endure, restrain yourself from rash actions or seeking revenge. These individuals are connected to the member of parliament. If anything were to happen, the situation would explode. It's beyond our capacity to bear."
Observing Lumian's silence and absence of emotional outburst, Franca let out a sigh of relief and continued, "I'll say it once more. It's best to leave this matter to the official Beyonders for investigation. Later, through my contacts, I'll inform them of this case and provide the suspect's identity and description.
"Although crucial physical evidence might have been lost by now and the body likely cremated hastily, as long as the official Beyonders discover the existence of abnormal pathway Beyonder powers in their jurisdiction, targeting the person I identified through divination, they will discover his problem sooner or later."
Upon hearing Franca's advice, Lumian nodded, his thoughts aligning with her suggestion.
"Let's go with that plan."
Franca relaxed, taking a moment to contemplate before speaking again.
"I won't divulge the precise details. I'll merely mention a peculiar ailment causing festering in the market district. There's suspicion that someone from the member of parliament's office might have wrapped a handkerchief around thick phlegm, and similar incidents may have been concealed by the police headquarters.
"If I don't do this, the official Beyonders might suspect you as the source of the information and thoroughly investigate you."
Lumian acknowledged her concerns with a curt response, signifying his agreement.
After bidding farewell to Franca and departing Rue des Blouses Blanches, he encountered Jenna on his way to Salle de Bal Brise.
"Well, if it isn't Celia?" Lumian greeted.

Showy Diva, dressed in a simple grayish-blue gown, had her brownish-yellow hair tied up in a natural bun. Her face lacked makeup, giving her an elegant appearance without her usual air of decadence.
Upon hearing Lumian call her by her real name, Jenna clenched her teeth and retorted,
"Just call me Jenna!"
Lumian sized her up.
"Did your mother hit you with a broomstick? Are you considering leaving the underground singer circle?"
"Dammit! You can't seem to wish anything good upon me, can you?" Jenna exclaimed. "My mother is a gentle and reasonable person. Why would she hit me with a broomstick?"
She smirked confidently.
"Initially, she opposed my singing in the dance halls, thinking it was dangerous and prone to debauchery. But after I explained how much I could earn each week without having to sleep with any man, she relented. She even said she'd come to Salle de Bal Brise after work today to watch me perform. Dammit, what am I going to do?"
Lumian deliberately asked, "If your mother saw you wearing a revealing dress and deliberately raising your leg while singing 'his touch is skilled indeed,' how would she react?"
Jenna tousled her brownish-yellow hair. "She'd storm the stage and beat me to a pulp!"
She mumbled to herself before suggesting, "I don't have to wear overly revealing dresses. Remember when I tried singing in a cocktail dress last time? The response was pretty good. It's been a while, but I can give it another shot. The key is the song selection. I'll discuss it with Franca. She has excellent taste. She even knows how to compose her own songs and write lyrics, though they're all rather peculiar..."
Lumian smiled and spoke up, "If that doesn't work out, I can have René organize a themed night event at Salle de Bal Brise. Tonight's theme will be love."
This would pair well with less suggestive love songs.
Jenna's eyes lit up. "That's a brilliant idea!"
She looked at Lumian awkwardly, offering her thanks.
"You're quite quick-witted. Uh, dammit, thank you!"
Without waiting for Lumian's response, Jenna instinctively glanced around and lowered her voice.
"I also told my mother that I'm good friends with Red Boots from the Savoie Mob and that she's protecting me. That's how I can sing at Salle de Bal Brise and stay safe. Remember, I came to you that

day to negotiate a higher singing fee. And thanks to Franca, you agreed.
"If my mother asks you, just give this answer."
Lumian nodded and teased, "It's called collusion."
"It's called a harmless fib," Jenna replied gleefully. "Just hold onto that story until I've been singing for another year. I'll save up enough money for my tuition and pay off my debts."
Lumian glanced at the apprentice actress and pondered, "Haven't you thought about seeking proper compensation for that accident?"
"How?" Jenna's eyes widened in confusion. "The court hasn't reached a final verdict yet."
Lumian chuckled.
"Why wait for the court? Settling debts is protected by the Guardian of Businesses. We can handle it ourselves."
"That factory owner never said he wouldn't pay us. His constant appeals are just about the division of responsibilities and the amount of compensation..." Jenna eyed Lumian suspiciously. "Are you suggesting we force him to compensate us? That's illegal!"
"Illegal?" Lumian looked amused. "As a mob leader, I break the law every day. Didn't you want to assassinate Margot and avenge your friend? Did legality matter to you back then?"
Jenna's words faltered as she muttered,
"Margot is a mob leader who has committed countless crimes. Each one of them is deserving of the gallows."
"So you want to be his judge and jury?" Lumian smiled. "That factory owner may have done many wrongs. Let's mask our faces, infiltrate his house, tie him up, and make him compensate everyone. Alternatively, we can convince him to hand over the money quietly and split it among ourselves to avoid arousing suspicion during subsequent investigations."
Jenna wore a troubled expression.
"I'll think about it. I'll consider it."
Ciel lived up to his reputation as a mob leader. Discussing breaking the law came as naturally to him as eating and drinking.
Lumian didn't press the matter further. Since Jenna wasn't in a hurry, he saw no need to worry about her.
...
As evening approached, Lumian sat in the café on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, awaiting another night.
For now, he had nothing to occupy his time. All he could do was wait for Franca or the Boss to procure the additional ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion, the final step before his breakthrough to Sequence 7.

"Boss, what would you like to have for dinner tonight?" Louis asked Lumian as the sky grew darker.
Just as Lumian was about to respond, Jenna approached.
Showy Diva had transformed herself, donning a dress the color of roses. The hem of her gown appeared to defy gravity, resembling an inverted flower.
Her long, brownish-yellow hair was fashioned into a simple bun, with most of it cascading smoothly over her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle, accentuating her complexion and striking features. A mole adorned the right side of her face, and she held a beautifully patterned fan in her hand.
This left Louis and Sarkota dumbfounded. They could hardly believe that this was the same "Little Minx" Jenna.
Jenna nervously asked Lumian, "Is this suitable?"
"Quite impressive." Lumian didn't discourage Jenna.
Suddenly, a deafening explosion echoed in the distance. The ground trembled visibly, and the café's glass windows rattled.
"Dammit, what's happening?" Jenna exclaimed, peering out of the window in shock.
Lumian stood up and made his way to the window. As he looked outside, he noticed the perplexed and flustered pedestrians.
In the distance, a plume of black smoke billowed from the south.
"Find out what's going on," Lumian instructed Louis.
Once Louis departed, Jenna approached Lumian, her gaze fixed on the dark smoke rising from the southern part of the market district. Anxiousness and concern filled her.
After some time, Louis returned to the café and reported to Lumian, "Boss, there was an explosion at the Goodville Chemical Factory."
A thud interrupted the conversation as Lumian turned to see Jenna's fan fall to the ground.
Jenna appeared to lose her spirit as she murmured, sounding disoriented, "My mother, my mother is there..."

Chapter 239: Fighting Fire

Before she could finish, Jenna snapped out of her daze. Adorned in a rose-colored dress that hugged her slender frame, she hurried towards the staircase and descended.

Witnessing this, Lumian motioned for Louis and Sarkota to maintain order in Salle de Bal Brise before giving chase.

Anxiety and fear filled Jenna's face, her expression teetering on the edge of collapse.

She made no attempt to conceal her Beyonder identity. She exerted every ounce of her strength, as if she intended to soar through Avenue du Marché and into the streets leading south of the market district.

Only the darkness of the sky and the unlit gas street lamps, combined with the chaos caused by the panicked pedestrians after the explosion, prevented anyone from noticing the extraordinary speed at which the woman ran.

Lumian swiftly caught up to her, his pace surpassing hers. He urgently tapped her shoulder and said, "Take to the shadows!"

Determined to reach Goodville Chemical Factory as swiftly as possible, Jenna ran a distance before comprehending Lumian's meaning. She altered her course slightly and darted towards the dimly lit area cast by the unilluminated street lamps, blending in seamlessly.

Assassins possessed the ability to conceal themselves within shadows.

Jenna's emotions surged, making it difficult for her to maintain control. Additionally, sprinting at full speed weakened the effectiveness of this ability. At times, she would become visible, and at others, she would vanish. Nevertheless, compared to before, she managed to avoid drawing much attention from passersby.

Lumian ran alongside the shadows, paying no heed to the perplexed gazes directed his way, his nostrils filled with the lingering scent of Jenna's perfume.

Pushing his Hunter's speed to its limits, he left observers dumbfounded.

Certainly, such behavior would arouse suspicion, but he paid it no mind.

As the two Beyonders endowed with enhanced physiques raced at full tilt, they arrived at Rue Saint-Gerre near Trier's city walls within a mere ten minutes.

The area was teeming with factories, and the sky was shrouded in dusky smoke tinged with a yellowish hue, obscuring the fading glow of the sunset.

Emerging from the shadows, Jenna caught sight of the blazing metal container—Goodville Chemical Factory was engulfed in flames, with firefighters battling desperately to extinguish the inferno and rescue those trapped inside.

Some of the rescuers wore peculiar masks adorned with elongated, pointed beaks, while others sported mechanical octopuses on their faces. Several donned black helmets that appeared to consist of multiple layers. The commonality among them was the presence of apparatuses resembling steam backpacks, albeit with significant differences. Thick rubber hoses extended from the contraptions, connecting to the "masks."

Without a moment's hesitation, Jenna rushed for Goodville Chemical Factory, where sporadic explosions continued to erupt.

The pungent odor in the air threatened to overwhelm Lumian's sense of smell. He seized Jenna's shoulder and spoke in a deep voice, "Do you know which factory your mother is in?"

Jenna was taken aback. "I don't know."

"Have you come equipped to shield yourself from chemical contamination?" Lumian switched questions.

"No," Jenna replied, her confusion evident.

"Then are you attempting to commit suicide?" Lumian scolded. "Perhaps your mother has already been rescued. Let us first search the area where the injured are being attended to. Are you venturing inside to create further chaos for the rescue team?"

Jenna's heart churned with conflicting emotions. She yearned to rush to the chemical plant to find her mother, yet she couldn't deny the logic in Lumian's words.

After Lumian pulled her back, she followed him with a vacant mind for a few paces. Then, her senses returned, and she sprinted toward Église du Sifflet, not far from Rue Saint-Hilaire.

It stood as the grand cathedral of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Jenna had witnessed the rescued victims being carried there.

In a matter of seconds, she and Lumian arrived at the square outside the cathedral.

It was teeming with workers from Goodville Chemical Factory, groaning in agony. However, a significant number of them lay unconscious, and some no longer drew breath.

Doctors and nurses, clad in white coats, maneuvered through the crowd, feverishly providing first aid. They guided those deemed salvageable to a two-story carriage stationed at the square's periphery, adorned with various coats of arms or Sacred Emblems. From there, they transported them to several major hospitals in Quartier de Noël.

Jenna's body involuntarily quivered as her gaze swept over the lifeless bodies and injured individuals, fearing what she might witness.
Lumian seized her arm and guided her across the square, in search of Elodie.
The gas lamps lining the square cast a rudimentary glow, granting them a modicum of illumination.
After a few minutes, Lumian's keen Hunter eyesight detected a wounded figure whom he suspected to be Elodie.
Upon receiving the news, Jenna dashed over, crouched down, and studied the unconscious person's face.
The injured individual's golden wig had mostly been singed away, exposing her flaxen hair, now blackened by the flames.
Her eyes, adorned with smudged eye shadow, remained tightly shut, her countenance marred by soot. Burns covered her body, and her lips bore an unnatural blue tinge. It was none other than Elodie, the cleaner at Auberge du Coq Doré—Jenna's mother.
"Mom! Mom!" Jenna's strength evaporated, and she crumpled beside Elodie.
Realizing her mother's unconscious state, occasionally punctuated by twitches, Jenna abruptly rose to her feet and muttered to herself, "We need a doctor. We must get her to a hospital without delay!"
Having confirmed the victim's identity, Lumian focused on assessing Elodie's luck and deduced that it was dire. Even if she were swiftly transported to the hospital, her chances of survival seemed slim.
Swiftly, he seized Jenna and spoke in a solemn tone, "Help me shield her from prying eyes."
Jenna regarded him with astonishment. Infused with his composed demeanor, she turned her body to block the area on Elodie's left side.
"I possess a healing agent from mysticism. Let us first test its efficacy," Lumian explained in a hushed tone as he circled around to Elodie's right side, his back serving as a barrier for her other flank.
A healing agent from mysticism... Jenna's eyes sparkled, a glimmer of hope illuminating her face.
Intently, Jenna watched as Lumian produced an iron-colored metal canister, unscrewed the cap, and poured its contents into her mother's mouth.
After more than ten seconds, Elodie appeared to regain some consciousness and swallowed the curative liquid.
Observing this, Jenna felt a slight wave of relief wash over her. She

instinctively sensed that her mother's condition had improved marginally.
Time seemed to stretch unbearably, suffocating her. A minute felt like an eternity.
Finally, she witnessed the burns on Elodie's body start to heal at an astonishing pace, and the bluish tint on her lips gradually faded.
Jenna looked up at Lumian, her astonishment palpable.
Countless words clamored to escape her lips, but they remained lodged there, unable to form coherent utterances.
Lumian met her gaze and nodded. He whispered, "This agent works wonders in treating external injuries and alleviating ailments caused by chemical fumes. It can transform near-fatal wounds into severe injuries, severe injuries into minor ones, and minor injuries into complete recovery.
"Your mother suffered severe injuries earlier. For now, her life is no longer in immediate danger. However, she will require extensive treatment in the days to come. Otherwise, her condition may deteriorate."
Upon hearing the words "no longer in immediate danger," Jenna's vision blurred.
She had suppressed her tears, determined not to let them hinder her search and her mother's treatment.
But now, tears streamed down her face. She raised her hands, clumsily wiping them away, and muttered incoherently, "Thank you... Thank you..."
Amidst her words, distant cries reached their ears.
Relatives of the deceased had arrived.
Just as Lumian was about to offer a jest to lighten the mood, a muffled thunder resounded in the air.
Rumble!
Instinctively, Lumian looked up and beheld a thick dark cloud looming over Rue Saint-Hilaire, where flames still flickered and explosions echoed.
The cloud wasn't expansive, enshrouding only a few streets.
Silver-white lightning streaked across the sky, accompanied by muted thunderclaps that reverberated through everyone's hearts.
Torrential rain poured down, concentrated over Rue Saint-Hilaire and Goodville Chemical Factory.
The grayish-black smoke tinged with yellow swiftly dissipated, settling to the ground. The flames were swiftly extinguished, and no further explosions occurred.
As swiftly as it had arrived, the storm dissipated. The dark clouds dispersed, and the setting sun on the horizon cast a fiery glow.

Within the golden-red light, a behemoth soared above Rue Saint-Hilaire.
It was a dark gray airship, its elongated and circular balloon emitting a loud buzzing sound.
At the rear of the hull, paddlewheels spun frenziedly, while numerous cannon muzzles and bomb ports adorned its surface. At that moment, a translucent turquoise liquid rained down upon Goodville Chemical Factory below.
The acrid stench in the air began to subside.
Are the authorities resolving the catastrophe? The dark clouds, the lightning, and the rain didn't seem natural. *Could they be the work of a Beyonder or Sealed Artifact?* It almost resembled the handiwork of a deity... Lumian withdrew his gaze, a tinge of astonishment in his eyes.
Jenna had also witnessed what had just happened, but her focus remained fixed on her mother's injuries, not dwelling too deeply on what had transpired.
Elodie's burns had mostly healed, leaving behind only a few charred remnants. Her breathing had stabilized, and although her lips remained pale, it didn't seem to cause much concern to those around.
The curative agent had taken full effect, bringing stability to her condition.
Jenna closed her eyes and absentmindedly wiped her face.
At that moment, a voice nearby called out, "Celia!"
Jenna glanced to the side and waved her hand. "Julien, over here!"
A young man, standing nearly 1.75 meters tall, swiftly made his way to Elodie's side. Clad in a grayish-blue worker's uniform, he had flaxen-colored hair and eyes that mirrored Jenna's blue hues. His features were rather pleasing to the eye.
He looked at Elodie with concern and asked hurriedly, "How's Mom?"
Jenna pursed her lips and replied, "She sustained serious injuries, but she'll pull through."
Relief washed over Julien, who then cast a curious glance at Jenna. "Why are you dressed like that... And who is he?"
Only then did Jenna realize she was wearing a rose-colored gown. Hastily, she explained, "I came straight from the theater. This is my friend, Ciel. He has been a great help."
"Thank you," Julien sincerely expressed his gratitude to Lumian.
Lumian nodded and advised, "Fetch a doctor and arrange for a carriage to take her to the hospital immediately. Otherwise, her condition may worsen."
"Alright." Julien dashed off to find the nearest doctor and nurse.

Lumian turned to Jenna and said, "If you can't secure a carriage promptly, hire one yourself."
Jenna nodded, her gaze filled with gentle concern as she looked at her unconscious mother. She whispered, "I owe you my gratitude this time..."

Chapter 240: Bewitchment

Lumian cast a contemplative gaze at Jenna, his lips forming a tight line.

"You lack the awareness of an Assassin and the understanding that you've stepped into the realm of mysticism. Had you possessed such insight, you might have joined mystical gatherings through Franca and procured valuable resources in the past month or two. Though they may not rival the potency of my healing agent, it would have been a proactive step instead of watching your mother's condition deteriorate."

Jenna, instead of erupting in a fit of humiliation and resorting to vulgar retorts, remained silent for a few moments before curtly acknowledging his words.

This response left Lumian at a loss. He clicked his tongue and spoke again.

"Of course, considering your financial constraints and the weight of debts and tuition fees, even if you were to participate in these mysticism gatherings, you wouldn't be able to afford much. It would be more of an opportunity to earn money or valuable items by accepting commissions."

Just then, Jenna's brother, Julien, arrived with a doctor and two nurses.

The doctor glanced at Elodie with a puzzled expression and inquired, "I recall that there was no need to resuscitate her..."

"You remembered incorrectly," Lumian calmly interjected.

The doctor, overwhelmed by the influx of injured patients, had his memories tangled and disorganized. Upon hearing Lumian's remark, he assumed he must have mistaken the person. Consequently, he swiftly tended to Elodie's remaining external injuries and arranged for her to be carried into the carriage, awaiting transportation to the hospital.

...

Connected to Quartier de Noël and the bustling market district, stood Passy Bridge, one of the five bridges that stretched over the mighty Srenzo River in the city of Trier.

Nestled beside Passy Bridge was the Holy Palace Hospital, generously funded by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. Elodie, a devout follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, had been admitted to this renowned establishment. Placed on the top floor of the white six-story building, she shared a ward with five other patients.

Jenna watched as doctors and nurses meticulously drew blood, conducted examinations, and administered intravenous drips. A soft sigh escaped her lips.

"The hospital has undergone quite a transformation in the past few years..."
"Oh?" Lumian was puzzled.
Jenna's expression darkened as she replied, "A few years ago, when my father and the others were brought to the hospital, the more severe cases were immediately taken to the operating room. Those with lesser injuries were simply bandaged and given medication to gauge its effectiveness. There was no blood being drawn, and the examinations were rudimentary. It's completely different now. The entire process seems to have changed."
"That's a good thing." Lumian nodded.
It looked more professional.
As the two spoke in hushed tones, Jenna's brother, Julien, diligently assisted the doctors and nurses. He answered inquiries about the patients' normal physical conditions, aided in moving IV stands, and was dispatched to the pharmacy as needed.
However, even after the medical professionals in their white coats had concluded their tasks, he had yet to return.
The doctor overseeing Elodie's care approached Jenna, holding a writing board, and observed her rose-colored gown. His expression softened.
"Is Elodie your mother?" he inquired.
"Yes," Jenna confirmed with a nod.
The male doctor pondered for a moment before speaking, "Your mother's condition is better than I anticipated. It seems surgery may not be necessary at this time. Of course, this assessment is preliminary and contingent upon the results of the tests we conducted.
"That's some good news. On the other hand, your mother has suffered severe burns. She may need to remain hospitalized for months, half a year, or even longer. Even if she recovers, she will likely be in a weakened state.
"The Church's philanthropic foundation will cover the initial two days of treatment. The remaining expenses will be deducted once the accident insurance from the factory is settled. However, you must be prepared to bear the subsequent costs yourself. It won't be a small sum. I must caution you not to have excessive expectations of the accident insurance. From my experience, it typically takes an average of three to five years to obtain compensation. You must understand that our Intis laws tend to favor factory owners and bankers in order to protect their interests."
Jenna didn't hesitate for a moment.
"I will ensure my mother's full recovery."
Jenna had already contemplated the possibility of borrowing

money from both Franca and Lumian if she found herself in need of a substantial sum. She was willing to repay them in installments at a later date. Whether it meant making monthly or weekly payments for the treatment, she was prepared to cut back and save, reducing her previous debt payments, while also relying on her income as a part-time underground singer.
However, this meant that her plan to remain an underground singer for just one year, as she had initially intended, would need to be extended. It seemed she might have to continue as an underground singer for two, or even three, years.
The doctor briefly assessed Jenna's appearance and attire before giving her the necessary instructions.
"Take this form and make a payment of 200 verl d'or at the payment counter on the first floor."
200... Jenna breathed a sigh of relief. She signed the form under her real name, Celia Bello, and took it with her as she descended the stairs.
On her way down, she glanced at Lumian, who was by her side, and hesitated before speaking.
"I-if I ever find myself in need of a large sum for medical fees in the future, I think I would like to borrow from you."
Jenna had always been a stubborn individual with her own principles. In the past, when she worked tirelessly to earn money in various dance halls within the market district, the thought of borrowing from Franca or asking for her help in securing an easy and lucrative part-time job had never crossed her mind. But now, for the sake of her mother, Elodie, she was willing to let go of her stubbornness in this regard.
Although Lumian had already "squandered" more than 700 verl d'or on himself and received an advance from the proceeds he could obtain from Salle de Bal Brise, he showed no signs of concern. He replied nonchalantly, "Okay."
Jenna regarded him suspiciously.
"I thought you might hesitate for a moment. Franca mentioned that you needed a significant sum of money for something important."
Lumian chuckled.
"That's for advancing and purchasing the main ingredient for Pyromaniac. However, it doesn't prevent me from lending you money. As a Beyonder and the leader of the Savoie Mob, even if I don't have a coppet at the moment, I can assist you in acquiring the necessary funds.
"The simplest solution would be to have René sign a long-term contract with you, advancing you 10,000 verl d'or. Then, 50% of

your income from the dance hall will be deducted each day to repay the loan in installments. Once it's fully repaid, the contract will naturally be terminated."
Jenna fell silent for a moment, realizing that something that had deeply troubled her was easily resolved in Ciel's presence.
Lumian glanced at her and smirked.
"As an Assassin, you shouldn't fret about medical expenses like these. If you aim to advance in the future, you'll need tens of thousands in funds.
"You need to change your mindset now. Don't hold the law in such high regard. As you heard earlier, Intis's laws don't protect the poor. We can only protect ourselves.
"Once you've come to terms with this, we'll kidnap the former factory owner and extract enough cash from him. After the verdict is announced and he pays the compensation for your father's accident, you can donate the money to someone in need.
"As long as we execute it cleanly, combined with Franca's anti-divination measures, the likelihood of success is exceedingly high. It won't leave a trace behind. It's improbable for a factory owner like him to have Beyonder bodyguards."
Jenna's heart raced at his words. She hesitated for a moment before speaking.
"It just doesn't sit right with me...
"Dammit, are you the Instigator, or will I become the Instigator? How are you so adept at bewitching people?
"Eventually, you'll have to face the consequences of breaking the law, won't you?"
Lumian smirked once again.
"I didn't finish. We only do what's necessary. We can't act recklessly. Not only would it bring danger, but it could also increase the risk of losing control. Kidnapping the factory owner is to reclaim the compensation your family deserves."
Jenna fell silent once more.
Realizing they were about to reach the first floor, she hurriedly said, "I need to use the washroom."
By the time she emerged from the washroom, she had a stack of 200 verl d'or notes in her hand.
Seeing Jenna pay the initial treatment fee, Lumian glanced at her rose-colored gown and commented,
"You can't tend to a patient dressed like this. I'll return to the dance hall and fetch your clothes. I'll also help you secure some time off.
"If your mother's condition worsens, come to me or Franca immediately."
Having just examined Elodie's luck and confirmed that her

condition was no longer critical, though still uncertain of improvement, Lumian found it somewhat chaotic. It might have been dependent on the hospital's treatment effectiveness.
"Okay." Jenna pursed her lips and nodded.
...
On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.
Just as Lumian was about to inform Manager René about Jenna and ask him to reschedule tonight's performance, Louis approached him.
Louis cast a quick glance around and lowered his voice.
"Boss, about half an hour ago, Boss sent someone to deliver a bag of items to the financial safe. He said it was for you."
Something from Boss... Supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion? As expected of a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway... Lumian nodded slightly, pleased, and passed through the café, entering the second-floor corridor.
Upon opening the safe, he felt a burning sensation.
Inside the grayish-white cloth bag were three glass bottles. One contained bubbling crimson blood, from which flames burst with each bubble. Another held blood-colored powder at the bottom, while the third contained a finger-sized stone emitting a red fluorescent light.
Fire Salamander blood, Redcrown Balsam powder, Magma Pyroxene... Indeed, supplementary Pyromaniac ingredients... Lumian picked up the items, satisfied.
...
3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, outside Apartment 601.
Lumian, having left Salle de Bal Brise, headed straight to Franca's place. He intended to borrow 4,000 verl d'or, using his share of the Harvest Sacrifice as collateral.
Upon opening the door and seeing Lumian, Franca clicked her tongue and remarked, "Did you hear? There was an explosion at a factory in the southern part of the market district. Numerous incidents have been occurring in the market district lately, giving me the sense that a storm is brewing."
Upon hearing this, Lumian instantly recalled something.
He spoke in a deep voice, "There was an accident at the Goodville Chemical Factory. This morning, the owner of the factory paid a visit to the member of parliament's office."

Chapter 241: Indomitable Spirit

After hearing Lumian's words, Franca exclaimed, "Dammit! Are we dealing with those lot again? What's Hugues Artois up to?"

"I can't quite fathom the purpose behind causing a chemical plant explosion either... Maybe it's just a coincidence. Bono Goodville and Hugues Artois have quite a good relationship. It's not unusual for him to pay a visit, but it just so happens that there was an explosion at the chemical plant today," Lumian pondered before speaking.

He couldn't dismiss every coincidence in life, but he also couldn't treat each one as a problem.

Franca nodded thoughtfully and remarked, "True enough.

"However, I must remind you that the chemical plant explosion isn't meaningless. It may have already resulted in numerous deaths, and that holds great significance for certain dark rituals. The living are always the third-best sacrifice."

"Could this also be part of a ritual?" Lumian was somewhat taken aback.

Franca corrected him, "There's no real distinction between using a knife to sacrifice someone and using a chemical plant explosion to kill the intended victim as part of a ritual for the deity the host desires to invoke. Your understanding of ritualistic magic is still too narrow. Some rituals may indeed require such explosions to be effective."

It's akin to the Substitution Spell, requiring a substitute to assume the identity to be replaced for an extended period before the ritual. Lumian grasped the idea.

Franca let out a sigh.

"This is merely my conjecture. It doesn't necessarily mean it's true. However, we must alert the official Beyonders to be vigilant for signs of a ritual and to investigate the role of the member of parliament's office in this catastrophe.

"F*ck, if that bloke wasn't a member of parliament, I'd have captured him tonight, strung him up from the ceiling, and given him a thrashing. I'd interrogate him about his intentions and his connection to those heretics.

"Sigh, in that explosion just now, countless individuals lost their parents, spouses, siblings, or children. I wonder how many people are praying, worrying, and suffering for their injured loved ones."

"Like Jenna," Lumian interjected.

Franca was momentarily stunned. "What did you say?"

"Jenna's mother works at the Goodville Chemical Factory. Didn't you know?" Lumian inquired.

Franca was taken aback before asking with concern, "How is her mother?"
Lumian briefly recounted how he had accompanied Jenna to Rue Saint-Hilaire in search of Elodie and had used the last bit of healing agent to save her from near death.
Franca let out a sigh of relief and expressed in anguish, "Why wasn't I there! Why wasn't I there!"
Lumian's lips twitched as he calmly said, "You still have a chance. Jenna is fretting over the subsequent medical expenses."
"I'll go to the Holy Palace Hospital right away!" Franca's eyes lit up, and she was about to dash out of the apartment.
Lumian hastily called out to her, "Don't forget to bring the Poison Spur Mob's healing agent with you. I'm concerned that her condition might worsen."
Just like Monsieur Ruhr.
Without waiting for Franca's response, he added, "Also, help Jenna bring the dress she wore this morning."
"Right... I need to borrow 4,000 verl d'or from you and offer half of the Harvest Sacrifice as collateral. I've already gathered the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion."
"So soon?" Franca exclaimed, taken aback. "I haven't even begun searching for you!"
Lumian smirked once again.
"Last night, I ran into Boss at the entrance of the member of parliament's office and confessed my plans to advance and about the advance on my pay. I requested he keep an eye on the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion."
The more Franca listened, the more complicated her expression became.
"You're more cunning than I realized, kid... Confiding in Gardner about this matter is indeed the best approach.
"However, can't you consider me? Don't you know that I also wanted to help you gather the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion through Gardner? He's a Sequence 6 Conspirer or a Sequence 5 Hunter, and he has a group of Hunters working with him. He won't be lacking in such things. Luckily, I haven't approached him in the past two days. Otherwise, he would have surely suspected that we were having an affair."
Lumian had always assumed Franca would seek materials through the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. He hadn't expected her to approach Gardner Martin out of convenience and proximity, almost exposing their secret relationship.
Franca returned to her room and retrieved a banknote worth 4,000 verl d'or from somewhere. She handed it to Lumian and solemnly

reminded him, "Once you obtain the main ingredient, don't rush to concoct the potion. You must ensure that your condition can withstand the impact of your advancement. Otherwise, it's best to delay it for a while. The main ingredient is much easier to preserve than the potion itself."
"I'm well aware," Lumian replied calmly.
After a moment of thought, he asked, "Before you go to Jenna, it would be wise to inform the authorities. The explosion just happened, so there might be some clues left behind."
"Yes," Franca agreed.
Before bidding farewell, Lumian asked curiously, "If the living are the third-best sacrifice, what are the second-best and the best?"
"The second-best are beings with Beyonder characteristics. And the best..." Franca smiled. "They are demigods."
...
Quartier de Noël, sixth floor of Holy Palace Hospital.
As Jenna returned to the ward from the washroom, she spotted her brother Julien assisting their mother, Elodie, in tucking the corners of the blanket.
Elodie remained unconscious, but her complexion showed signs of improvement.
Julien stood up and beckoned his sister to the side. He whispered, "Celia, don't fret about the upcoming medical expenses. I'll find a solution. Keep attending your acting lessons at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."
Jenna's heart swelled with gratitude as she inquired, "Did the doctor talk to you?"
"Yes, he just did." Julien nodded with solemnity.
Jenna pressed her lips together and assured him, "Don't worry. My friends have agreed to lend me money. I can repay them over three years with minimal interest. With my earnings as an underground singer and your wages, if we are frugal, it should be enough without affecting our respective apprenticeships."
There was a moment of silence as Julien pondered, before he finally spoke, "That Ciel?"
"Yes, he's one of them, but I have other friends too. And Franca, the 'Red Boots' I mentioned last night." Jenna felt the need to clarify the situation, fearing her brother might resort to extreme measures.
She recalled how two years ago, Julien had contemplated secretly selling himself to Balam-Paz Import and Export Corporation, unbeknownst to their mother, in order to become a disposable mercenary and repay all their debts, allowing Jenna to pursue her dreams as an apprentice actress. Fortunately, that plan had been

thwarted in the end.
Just as Julien was about to respond, his gaze fell upon a tall, slender woman standing at the ward's entrance.
She donned a blouse, light-colored breeches, a thin black-on-white checkered tweed top, and vibrant red boots. Her long flaxen-colored hair was tied back in a simple ponytail. With eyebrows that extended toward her temples and eyes that sparkled with energy, she exuded an irresistible charm.
Jenna eagerly approached her.
"Franca."
...
Rue des Blouses Blanches, inside the safe house.
Lumian, having acquired Sun Star and currently distilling its extract, took a seat and awaited Madam Magician's response.
On the desk in front of him, Fire Salamander blood, Magma Pyroxene powder, and Redcrown Balsam powder were neatly arranged.
Just as the Sun Star extract was about to be completed, the arm-height "doll" dressed in a light-gold gown, with exquisite yet slightly peculiar facial features, appeared on the windowsill.
It placed a metal biscuit tin on the windowsill and sniffed the air.
"Use this extract the next time you summon me."
"Alright." The request from the other party was so unusual that Lumian was momentarily taken aback. His instinctive response was the only thing he could offer.
In an instant, the puppet messenger vanished before his eyes. Lumian opened the bright silver biscuit tin and beheld the small crimson "heart" burning silently within.
Without hesitation, he grabbed a prepared beer mug and dropped in the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.
Immediately afterward, Lumian poured over 50 milliliters of Fire Salamander blood into the cup.
With a sizzling sound, the crimson liquid evaporated, transforming into a mist of blood that swirled around the "heart."
The Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic softened considerably, its surface rippling like the water of a lake.
Following the potion formula's instructions, Lumian added Magma Pyroxene powder, Redcrown Balsam powder, and Sun Star extract into the beer mug. As he did so, the blood mist surrounding the "heart" abruptly shrank, giving rise to a yellowish liquid with red bubbles.
In Lumian's eyes, this was the Pyromaniac potion.
Rather than consuming it immediately, Lumian closed his eyes.
In his mind, he conjured images of Flameng's lifeless body

dangling from a window frame, the lunatic's will inscribed on a sheet of white paper. He envisioned Monsieur Ruhr, his body ravaged by decay. He pictured Madame Michel, drowning her sorrows in drink and singing boisterously, only to ultimately meet her demise by hanging herself in the morning light. He also saw the cries that echoed through Sifflet Square.

Then, he glimpsed his own stubborn and determined self as a wanderer. He witnessed his unwavering spirit, refusing to surrender despite the repeated blows. He envisioned an alternative outcome for himself. He witnessed the sorrow, anger, powerlessness, and oppression that came with pursuing hope, only to be engulfed by darkness.

The mocking laughter of fate resounded in his ears, igniting a raging fire within his heart.

If this is the unavoidable conclusion;

If this is the fate of insignificance,

If efforts yield no fruit, and hope remains forever out of reach;

Then I shall fight with every ounce of my being to change it all!

Even if there is no light ahead, and hope dwindles to a mere flicker, I will fight until my last breath!

Motherf*cker member of parliament!

Motherf*cker Guillaume Bénet!

Motherf*cker heretics!

Motherf*cker Termiboros!

Motherf*cker Inevitability!

Lumian's eyes snapped open as he solidified his final acting principle as a Provoker.

Provocation symbolized indomitable spirit!

He didn't need this for digestion assistance. With a fire raging within his chest, he seized the beer mug and guzzled down the liquid.

It burned from his mouth, down his esophagus, into his stomach, and seared into his heart.

Chapter 242: Pyromaniac

Instantaneously, Lumian felt an inferno raging within him. The scorching agony seared through his body and soul, engulfing him completely. This sensation was not alien to him. Whether it was the dire wounds inflicted during his pursuit of the flaming monster or the brink of losing control while receiving a boon, all had set him ablaze.

In this very moment, the tormenting fire failed to extinguish the blazing determination in his heart. He defied destiny, yearning to alter the course of events, to incinerate the oppressive flames of despair and desolation.

Instead of succumbing to the pain and collapsing to the ground, Lumian remained upright. Clenching his teeth and contorting his face, he refused to bow down.

Gradually, the agony became unbearable, and his body began to bend. Nevertheless, Lumian mustered all his strength to straighten his back, just as he had confronted Guillaume Bénet, the padre, and Termiboros, who had unleashed a cataclysmic calamity upon Cordu.

Step by step, he lowered his body and raised it again. The scent of singed flesh filled his nostrils, and the voice from infinity reverberated in his ears.

A familiar, excruciating pain pierced his skull, eliciting an involuntary cry. Cracks formed on his skin, and molten liquid akin to lava coursed beneath.

Desperately, Lumian leaned on the desk before him, seeking support.

The spot he touched promptly blackened and charred, permeating the air with the scent of burning timber.

His instinctive scream was stifled. His mouth hung open, expelling searing gas.

Instead of immediately uncorking the vial of gray amber perfume, he relied on the fire within his chest to combat the mounting anguish and the increasingly hazy thoughts welling up from within.

Seconds ticked away. Lumian, with gritted teeth, sensed the flames within his chest surging forth, mingling with the inferno raging throughout his being.

Gradually, the manifold pains subsided, and his muddled thoughts gradually cleared.

Using his hands as support, Lumian hoisted himself up and directed his gaze towards the full-length mirror in the room.

Reflected in the looking glass, his blond locks retained a tinge of

black, his attire reduced to tatters. His body bore scorch marks that swiftly scabbed over and fell to the floor, revealing his fair complexion.
Simultaneously, Lumian beheld two crimson flames ablaze within his blue eyes. It was only after striving to regain composure and still his racing heart that the flames gradually dissipated.
In the next second, In the next heartbeat, Lumian raised his right hand, manifesting a crimson flame in his palm.
He had triumphantly ascended to the Sequence 7 of the Hunter's path, emerging as a Pyromaniac!
From his palm, flames surged, intertwining with the original crimson hue, constantly compressing.
After a span of more than ten seconds, the fiery crimson transformed into an incandescent white. The temperature and explosive force it contained surged to greater heights.
I can wield the crimson flame directly or, by accumulating and compressing it for a duration, unleash an even more scorching white-hot blaze... Lumian's palm appeared impervious to the scorching heat as he allowed the white-hot flame to silently burn.
Having already conducted a preliminary assessment of his condition and the mystical knowledge he had acquired, Lumian had gained a fairly comprehensive understanding of the superpowers bestowed upon a Pyromaniac.
First and foremost, a Pyromaniac's spirituality had seen a remarkable improvement, leading to a transformative shift in Lumian's Spirit Vision. No longer confined to a chaotic spectacle, he now possessed the ability to employ a more discreet and expeditious activation method. Moreover, he could finally perceive the hues and shades his sister had described, discerning the various components of the Ether Body.
This newfound insight proved invaluable to a Hunter, enabling Lumian to better grasp an adversary's physical state and thereby target them with greater precision.
Secondly, his instinct for danger had undergone significant enhancement. Gone were the days when he only sensed trouble at the very brink of eruption. Through careful observation of his surroundings and the assimilation of information, Lumian could now activate his intuition preemptively. Consequently, he could detect if he was being followed and employ his anti-tracking techniques more effectively and flawlessly.
Thirdly, his command over flames had brought with it a handful of accompanying spells.
At present, Lumian's primary ability involved controlling the flames that originated from within him or were conjured by his

own hands. While he possessed an affinity for flames and combustible substances in his vicinity, his influence over them remained somewhat limited. It was possible that, upon digesting the Pyromaniac potion or advancing to a higher Sequence, corresponding changes might occur.

Furthermore, Lumian could employ the flames he created as weapons against his adversaries. However, once the flames left his body, they no longer fell under his dominion unless he had pre-invested a portion of his spirituality in them.

In essence, altering the trajectory of a fireball in mid-flight proved to be quite challenging, necessitating a supplementary expenditure of spirituality.

The control of flames could be categorized into seven distinct aspects:

Firstly, there was compression—a bombardment in the form of a fireball. The longer the compression lasted, the more flames gathered, resulting in a more potent strike.

Secondly, Lumian could ignite a layer of flames over his body, affording him a measure of defense against freezing effects, poisonous gases, and other forms of assault.

Thirdly, he could fashion various temporary weapons using flames, capable of inflicting scorching, cutting, and piercing damage. Depending on the time spent channeling the flames, this ability could be categorized as either crimson or blazing-white.

Fourthly, Lumian had mastered the art of delayed explosions. By employing additional spirituality and manipulating the structure, he could fashion a Flame Bomb that would detonate at a predetermined time, rather than immediately upon impact.

Fifthly, he possessed the power of area-of-effect attacks. By extending the reach of the flames instead of hurling them forth, Lumian could ensure precise control over their detonation, causing them to erupt at a desired location or manifest in different forms.

Sixthly, Lumian had honed the technique of Fire Infusion. Through close-quarters combat and the forceful clash of strength, he could gradually inject flames into an opponent's body before triggering their detonation.

Finally, the seventh aspect involved imbuing his weapon with fire damage.

The fire-type spells Lumian had acquired were instrumental in these various aspects, leveraging certain techniques to achieve effects that he could not ordinarily produce.

The spells at Lumian's disposal were as follows: Fire Raven, Blazing Spear, Wall of Fire, and Giant Fireball.

Of them all, the Fire Raven spell stood out as the most enchanting.

With its aid, Lumian could swiftly condense a flock of flaming ravens around him, bestowing a fraction of his spirituality upon each avian form. This granted him a degree of control even after they departed from his body, enabling them to momentarily adjust their flight path and lock onto their intended targets.

Without this spell, Lumian, a recent convert to Pyromaniac, would need to expend at least three times his present store of spirituality and energy to achieve a similar outcome. Moreover, the Fire Ravens would possess a significantly more clumsy and rigid disposition.

Blazing Spear, on the other hand, entailed the rapid condensation of white flames, though they could only maintain the shape of a spear. Infused with spirituality, they could roughly guide Lumian's created fireball.

By utilizing the ground as a conduit and drawing upon its own essence, Wall of Fire summoned forth a pair of flaming serpents that slithered toward the enemy, erecting a scorching barrier around them.

Giant Fireball demanded a span of ten to twenty seconds, akin to the compression of numerous crimson fireballs into a single devastating blast.

While the Pyromaniac's flames originated from his physical form and primarily inflicted bodily harm, they were also capable of burning a Spirit Body. Lumian was no longer defenseless against creatures of a soul-like nature, though he still relied on external assistance.

Additionally, the potion's modifications had bestowed upon his body a remarkable resistance to flames. Even if doused in animal fat and subjected to the flames of a torch for half a day, the damage he suffered would be minimal. Nevertheless, the concussive force of a fireball's explosion could still harm him in a conventional manner.

Lumian held the belief that as he advanced to higher Sequences, his body might even merge with fire itself.

With a casual flick of his right hand, the blazing white flame dissipated into the air.

Then, with a firm grip, he summoned a longsword crafted from crimson flames, materializing it from thin air.

Lumian brandished the fiery blade a few times, his disappointment evident. He muttered silently to himself, It possesses the ability to harm the enemy, but it cannot block or parry...

The flaming sword lacked a tangible form. Lumian surmised that he would need to reach a higher Sequence before he could turn

such a weapon corporeal.
He dismissed the flaming longsword and drew Hedsey's dagger.
As his fingers caressed the dagger's surface, a fiery blaze enveloped the blade.
Lumian tightened his grip on the hilt and executed a few thrusts with the dagger. He observed the rapid dissipation of red sparks in the air, creating an ethereal spectacle.
It can block and deal fire damage. Though it may lack scorching temperatures in this form, it remains highly useful.
The current problem lies in the fact that ordinary weapons cannot endure exposure to flames for long... Lumian pondered, nodding approvingly.
Having confirmed his Beyonder powers as a Pyromaniac, he swiftly organized his desk and donned a linen shirt, a brown jacket, and dark trousers.
Lumian cast a final glance at his reflection in the mirror, a smile curling upon his lips.
He placed the dark-blue cap upon his head, turned on his heel, and strode purposefully toward the door.
Crimson flames silently erupted in his wake, an ephemeral and blinding display.
...
On Avenue du Marché, outside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the member of parliament's office,
Lumian once again found himself seated among the destitute at the alley opposite, quietly observing the steady flow of people entering and exiting the targeted establishment.
In the wake of the explosion at Goodville Chemical Factory, countless workers had tragically lost their lives, leaving many more injured. The entire city of Trier was abuzz with news reporters flocking to the scene. As a result, Hugues Artois's office remained aglow with gas-powered wall lamps, as his staff tirelessly attended to visitors with varied intentions.
The member of parliament had yet to return home, and his entourage naturally remained within the khaki-colored building. Every room seemed to radiate with illumination, brimming with activity.
Leaning against the wall of the street, Lumian observed the comings and goings within the member of parliament's office, his mind churning with contemplation.
He yearned to ignite a "fire"!
He yearned to "incinerate" the despicable scoundrel responsible for spreading disease!
He was fully aware of the dire consequences that awaited him. As

a Pyromaniac, he understood that he alone was not yet strong enough to face off against the evil god's Blessed who surrounded Hugues Artois.
Yet, he simply longed to take action. He couldn't shake the feeling that no matter how fierce a conflagration may be, it all started with a single spark.

Chapter 243: Visit

Lumian's fury did not mean he would lose his composure—to just disguise himself and sneak into the member of parliament's office, where he would find the fellow who had dared to "casually spit" and incinerate him on the spot.

It wasn't a ridiculous scheme, but without enough information, taking such a risk could easily turn into suicide.

First and foremost, Lumian had no knowledge of the number or strength of the heretics present in the member of parliament's office.

He also had no idea how many protectors Bureau 8 or the two Churches had assigned to Hugues Artois, nor did he know their abilities.

Furthermore, he lacked precise details about the target's whereabouts or situation. Even if he managed to infiltrate the office successfully, finding the target would be no easy task.

Lastly, he hadn't yet devised a plan for sneaking in and, more importantly, a plan for a safe retreat.

Nevertheless, Lumian couldn't deny that the chaos caused by the Goodville Chemical Factory explosion provided an excellent opportunity for his infiltration.

For now, his temporary strategy was to be a patient hunter. He would trail the target silently, observing his movements and waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Based on the target's status in Hugo Artois's campaign, Lumian surmised that the man couldn't be too powerful. He certainly didn't possess godlike abilities. Even if he were a Mid-Sequence Beyonder, he would likely be no higher than a Sequence 7.

Lumian wasn't overly concerned if his judgment was wrong and the target turned out to be a Sequence 6 or even Sequence 5. In fact, he believed that Mr. K would find the hunt for heretics quite intriguing!

Phew... Lumian breathed out slowly, his gaze fixed on the brightly illuminated khaki-colored four-story building. He continued to gather useful information for his upcoming operation.

As time passed, he noticed middle-aged scavengers carrying linen bags, sifting through the trash piled beside the building.

This sight made Lumian sigh, fueling the fire of determination in his heart.

In Trier, people couldn't scavenge just for the sake of it. Each scavenger had an employer, whether they worked full-time or part-time. They were assigned specific scavenging areas and were not allowed to cross boundaries. Violations often led to conflicts

and violent encounters. As a result, Ruhr and Michel wished fervently that Hugues Artois would host banquets every day instead of wandering into areas where banquets were already being held, as those spots belonged to other scavengers.

The difference between full-time and part-time scavengers lay in their employment terms. Full-timers received a monthly salary from their employers, and the employers owned all the trash they collected. Occasionally, if they stumbled upon valuable or usable items, they might decide whether to surrender them or keep them for personal use. Part-timers like Ruhr and Michel didn't have a fixed salary. They scavenged in the morning and evening, delivering everything they found to a designated waste disposal site, typically owned by their employers.

These circumstances restricted street tramps to scavenging for food and clothing, with little opportunity to exchange their findings for money.

Lumian patiently waited until 9 p.m., observing as the number of guests visiting the member of parliament's office gradually dwindled. People stepped out onto the balconies for a smoke or a brief respite.

And then, his eyes widened as he spotted a figure.

Standing on the balcony of a second-floor room, there he was—the thin, pale man with curly dark-yellow hair and piercing brown eyes.

Dressed in a blue shirt, black vest, and a somber suit, complete with a bow tie, he held a cigarette, enveloped in a cloud of smoke, occasionally taking a drag. Lumian had seen him before in Franca's Magic Mirror Divination. It was the spitter.

Cough, cough, cough! A fit of violent coughing shook the frail young man, as if he wished to expel his lungs from his body.

Finally, he hacked up another glob of thick phlegm after some harrumphing.

Pulling out a handkerchief, he spat the viscous phlegm into it, wrapping it up and tucking it away in his pocket. He didn't discard it carelessly.

Lumian's eyes narrowed. He knows that his phlegm can transmit diseases as a result of mysticism.

As more people flocked to the balconies of their respective rooms, Lumian swiftly identified the familiar faces.

Member of Parliament Hugues Artois from the market district occupied the room at the top floor, boasting the largest balcony.

The red-haired woman resided on the same floor, right next door to him.

On the second floor, on the opposite end of the corridor from the

spitter, was a man in his thirties with gold-rimmed glasses, a document always in hand. Every now and then, he would wander to the balcony to enjoy a smoke and the view, displaying a lack of concern for the aftermath of the Goodville Chemical Factory explosion.
The third floor housed a tall, muscular middle-aged man, occupying the central office.
Directly beneath Hugues Artois, on the fourth floor, was a refined young woman in a white shirt and a dark-blue coat. She shared the same side of the building as the man with gold-rimmed glasses, deliberately avoiding any proximity to the spitter.
Lumian observed closely and deduced that the rooms adjacent to the spitter's were part of a collective office, likely accommodating several employees.
This implied that the probability of them holding any significant status or possessing Beyonder powers was negligible.
So, the other heretics intentionally distanced themselves from the incessant coughing and spitting man. They believe the member of parliament's office is heavily guarded, and that individual possesses Beyonder powers. It's highly unlikely for an attack to be directed at him. True enough. If an assault were to occur in the member of parliament's office, the target would undoubtedly be Hugues Artois and not one of his subordinates. Only then would it be worth the risk... Lumian pondered this realization earnestly for a moment and suddenly sensed an opportunity emerging.
The dilemma now lay in how Lumian could infiltrate the member of parliament's office unnoticed, particularly given his conspicuous golden hair with a touch of black. After all, he didn't have Franca's help.
After careful consideration, Lumian devised a plan.
He departed from the vicinity of the office and made his way back to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Without hesitation, he set up an altar and offered a prayer to the great existence, seeking His protection.
Lumian firmly believed that since the embrace of an angel would shield him from the prying eyes of any deity, it definitely ensured sufficient anti-divination effects!
Just as before, he found himself bathed in the radiant brilliance and divine majesty of the angel. Overwhelmed by indescribable emotions, he witnessed cascades of luminous wings enveloping him.
Once he completed this ritual, Lumian pressed his hand to his head.
His golden and black hair erupted into flames, cascading down

like withered grass until only a few hair roots remained.
Putting on his trusty dark-blue cap, he concealed his features behind the Mystery Prying Glasses. With his transformed appearance, Lumian left Rue des Blouses Blanches and ventured towards Avenue du Marché near Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. There, he located a clothing store that didn't specialize in cheap garments.
The two shop assistants, a man and a woman, were taken aback when they saw a person dressed like a vagrant entering, unsure of how to react.
In a panicked tone, Lumian explained, "I encountered a perverted thief who stole my clothes and trousers. I had no choice but to purchase this set from a nearby beggar."
The female shop assistant struggled to suppress her laughter.
They had witnessed similar situations countless times before, well aware that those who made such excuses were often involved in affairs with certain ladies, fleeing in a state of undress with their wallets once their husbands returned, only to seek refuge in the garments of a beggar.
When someone confidently claimed that their predicament stemmed from an affair, it usually meant they had genuinely encountered a twisted thief.
In the end, Lumian acquired a suit that appeared decent but was actually quite ordinary. It included a shirt, coat, bow tie, and a dark cane. Additionally, he opted for a brown wig and a matching fake beard.
The total cost came to 78 verl d'or.
After carefully covering his tracks and returning to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian shed his disguise and once again adorned the Mystery Prying Glasses. Following his recollection, he skillfully applied makeup to achieve his desired effect.
His aim was to transform himself into an older version. As he gazed into the mirror, Lumian gradually took on the appearance of a middle-aged man, complete with a fake brown beard affixed to his mouth and chin.
Thus, Lumian assumed the identity of Bono Goodville, the proprietor of the Goodville Chemical Factory.
Though the resemblance was only around 40 to 50%, anyone acquainted with Bono Goodville would instinctively mistake Lumian for the man, provided they didn't scrutinize or closely distinguish him.
In this guise, Lumian intended to infiltrate the member of parliament's office!

Before embarking on his mission, he ventured into the underground and stashed the tramp's attire in a cavern within the quarry.
Emerging from Underground Trier, Lumian hastened to the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the member of parliament's office, cane in hand.
After observing for a brief moment and ensuring that the figures in each room remained relatively unchanged, he lowered his head, partially concealing his face, and approached the entrance.
"Whom are you seeking?" inquired an armed guard donned in a dark blue uniform, blocking his path.
Lumian raised his head, withdrew his hand, and responded with anxiety in his voice, "I'm looking for the member of parliament."
One of the guards caught a clear glimpse of the visitor's face under the glow of the street lamp and involuntarily exclaimed, "Monsieur Goodville, what brings you here again..."
Abruptly, he halted his words, realizing that this gentleman, who had recently experienced a devastating explosion at his factory, had an abundance of issues to address this night, along with numerous concerns that required assistance.
The two guards refrained from further inquiry and stepped aside, granting Lumian passage.
The lobby on the ground floor bustled with activity, despite the late hour. Reporters, officials, representatives of charitable organizations, hospital staff reporting in, and various personnel responsible for receiving them filled the space.
Lumian preserved his desire to remain inconspicuous. With his head lowered, partially obscuring his face, he proceeded directly to the staircase. Employing the same tactic, he passed by the two armed guards and ascended to the second floor.
Orienting himself, Lumian bypassed the two employees who emerged from a nearby room and arrived in front of the office belonging to the unhealthy young man.
Embedded on the vermilion door was an aluminum-white nameplate inscribed with a few golden Intisian words: "Assistant Secretary, Tybalt Jacques."
Tybalt... Lumian smiled, donned his gloves, and tapped lightly on the door.

Chapter 244: Red and Black

Knock, knock, knock.

The office reverberated with an urgent knock.

A feeble and disinterested voice floated through the air.

"Come in, please."

Lumian turned the doorknob and pushed open the vibrant vermilion door. Before him stood a frail, gaunt young man.

Dressed in a blue shirt, black waistcoat, and somber suit, he stood by the expansive desk, his eyes fixed on the door.

As Tybalt Jacques recognized the visitor to be Bono Goodville, a chuckle escaped the assistant secretary.

"Don't fret. Decay is an unavoidable fate. It afflicts humans and organizations alike. Once the decay sets in, all sorts of troubles will arise..."

Before Tybalt could conclude, he saw Lumian approach. Guard raised, he blurted out,"What do you think you're doing..."

Bam! Lumian threw a punch, accompanied by a blazing crimson flame.

His action cut off Tybalt's words, forcing him to instinctively raise his forearm to block the blow.

Flames flickered, consuming Tybalt's sleeves.

Simultaneously, a taunting voice reached his ears.

"So weak?"

Originally, Lumian's plan was to cloak his fist in flames, launching a surprise attack on his adversary without alerting the nearby employees. In the ensuing chaos, he aimed to use Fallen Mercury and inflict a wound upon him. Then, before his foe could recover, Lumian would forcefully make his way past him, exiting the khaki-colored building housing the parliament member's office through the balcony.

Throughout this endeavor, he would employ fireballs, Fire Raven, and other techniques to impede his opponent. Even if he sustained injuries, he had to escape into a nearby alley and disappear into Underground Trier before Hugues Artois's security personnel, the red-haired woman, and the other campaign members could react.

After all, the fiery "armor" he created had the power to incinerate pathogens. With limited contact, the chances of contracting an illness were slim. And if something did manage to slip through, the symptoms would be mild enough for Lumian to endure until six in the morning.

If worse came to worst, he could borrow half a canister of healing agent from Franca.

Even Ruhr, a scavenger with his advanced age, succumbed to the

illness only an hour or two after being exposed to the thick phlegm. Lumian believed it would be even less of a problem for him.
Of course, the condition was that the thick phlegm represented one of Tybalt's more potent methods. He couldn't concoct a highly virulent disease that triggered symptoms within a minute or two. Nonetheless, Lumian had his flames to shield him.
Yet, now, after a swift exchange, Lumian realized that Tybalt Jacques was far weaker than he had presumed!
This revelation instantly altered Lumian's course of action.
Silently, his form became shrouded in a cloak of fiery crimson.
The flames undulated like liquid, seamlessly encasing his skin, hair, garments, and hat. They hung there, a constant flickering and flowing.
Crimson flames continued to emerge from Lumian's being, melding with the inferno.
It felt as though Lumian had wrapped himself in a crimson cloak. Amidst the swirling blaze, his disguised countenance and blue eyes, each harboring a blazing fire, came into view.
With a snap, he discarded the dark cane and launched a fist wreathed in flames towards Tybalt.
The cane's handle remained aglow, eradicating any traces of fingerprints, sweat, or handprints.
Bang! Bang! Bang! Tybalt staggered back two steps, as though battling a tempest of fire. His eyes burned with a reddened intensity.
He harrumphed and expelled thick phlegm at Lumian.
The viscous yellow-green phlegm met the fiery cloak and was instantly incinerated, emitting a sizzling sound.
Bam! Bam! Bam! Lumian's arms, engulfed in crimson flames, swung repeatedly, pinning Tybalt to a corner of the office. His back pressed against the wall, with no escape or retreat. All he could do was defensively parry with his arms.
Witnessing the Sputum of Disease prove futile and the surrounding air heating up under the flames' influence, causing his skin to scorch, Tybalt's heart constricted, and he was about to cry out for help.
However, just as he opened his mouth, Lumian's flaming fist collided with his arm, causing him to tremble. His words became trapped in his throat.
Tybalt attempted to call for aid, but his pleas were repeatedly interrupted by the adversary. The deep voice of his foe resounded in his ears.
"Is that all you have?"

"How dare a feeble fledgling like you spit so recklessly?"
"Didn't your deity teach you to behave with civility?"
"I shall summon a hundred vagabonds to spit in your mouth!"
The mockery inflamed Tybalt's eyes, and he momentarily forgot about seeking assistance. All he yearned for was the other party to suffer and perish.
Translucent blisters materialized on his exposed skin, brimming with a sickly yellowish-black fluid.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
Lumian's flaming fist consumed Tybalt's sleeve, rupturing the translucent blister within. Yet, the repugnant yellowish-black liquid failed to touch his flesh. It was first scorched by the flames before being halted by the gloves.
The lingering pathogens on the surface of the gloves rapidly dissipated beneath the crimson flames' effect.
Amidst the relentless but non-lethal strikes, all the translucent blisters burst of their own accord within the increasingly sweltering environment. The faint yellowish-black liquid sizzled and evaporated, forming an almost imperceptible mist around Tybalt.
However, the mist was either consumed by the flames or melted by the soaring temperatures. It couldn't breach the fiery cloak and corrode Lumian's body.
In that moment, Tybalt, battered multiple times, regained his senses from the Provocation. He opened his mouth and cried out for aid.
High-temperature gas and dissipating flames infiltrated Tybalt's mouth as Lumian's fist connected. The heat contorted his expression, rendering him unable to scream.
"Feeling grand, are we? Enjoying yourself?"
"When you spat without a care, did you ever consider that it would lead to your own demise?"
"Taking your life is no different from slaughtering a chicken!"
Lumian locked his gaze onto Tybalt's eyes, witnessing despair, fear, and pleas for mercy slowly emerge.
He didn't relent. With fists ablaze in crimson flames, he unleashed another relentless onslaught of strikes.
He had no intention of evading Tybalt's feeble attempts at defense; each blow found its mark.
With a subdued thud, Lumian abruptly halted and withdrew his hands.
Tybalt remained motionless against the wall, his eyes vacant.
The flames enveloping Lumian's form dissipated like a receding river, leaving behind a trace of crimson in his footsteps.

Without sparing Tybalt a second glance, Lumian stooped to retrieve his cane. He took Mr. K's finger and pressed it against the wall beside Tybalt.
Having done so, Lumian removed his half top hat and placed it upon his chest, bowing to Tybalt.
Then, he strode past his lifeless, statue-like prey and ventured onto the balcony. Concealed by the shadows, he pressed against the wall and effortlessly leaped to the side of the khaki-colored building.
Only then did the occupants upstairs sense something amiss. Several individuals rushed out, peering into the outside world. Lumian's figure had already vanished into the depths of the dark alley.
Simultaneously, a muffled sound emanated from Tybalt's rigid body.
Boom!
In an instant, he erupted from within, crimson flames splattering flesh and internal organs in every direction.
Fire Infusion!
Pyromaniac's Fire Infusion!
Prior to Lumian's departure, Tybalt had teetered on the precipice of death. His organs and brain had been consumed by the injected flames. What ensued was primarily the annihilation of his Spirit Body.
There were three reasons why Lumian had a change of heart at the last moment, opting to forgo the quickest and simplest method of dispatching Tybalt.
Firstly, utilizing the Montsouris ghost could potentially impact Tybalt's family. If possible, it was preferable to avoid such measures, despite the high probability that they had already succumbed to the influence of an evil deity. Secondly, he could utilize the implosion to create a gruesome scene of carnage, strewn with flesh and blood. Coupled with Mr. K's fingerprint, it would point subsequent investigators in the direction of the Aurora Order. It would also serve as a clear indication that Tybalt was a follower of an evil god. Thirdly, by utilizing Fire Infusion, he could delay the explosion and dismantle Tybalt's Spirit Body, thereby minimizing the efficacy of the evil god's Blessed's investigations through spirit channeling.
Furthermore, there was another reason. Beating and cursing Tybalt to death brought Lumian an undeniable sense of satisfaction.
...
Before long, a group of seven or eight individuals, including

Hugues Artois, the red-haired lady, and the bespectacled secretary, arrived at Tybalt Jacques's door.
What greeted their eyes were scattered flesh, fragments, and internal organs, along with scorch marks that marred the ground.
The sight of red and black intermingled was jarring, rendering everyone present speechless.
"Who could have done this?" Hugues Artois exclaimed, horror etched on his face.
In his mind, the murder of Tybalt and the macabre aftermath served as a chilling warning and a preview of his own impending demise!
After all, who would go to such lengths to target an assistant secretary?
The red-haired lady cast a brief glance at Hugues Artois before speaking in an androgynous tone,
"Based on the evidence before us, it appears that the perpetrator is a Pyromaniac, or perhaps even more formidable. Given Tybalt's capabilities, he should have been dispatched within ten seconds. However, the assailant deliberately prolonged the act.
"It seems that the goal was to create this gruesome scene. It bears the hallmark of those lunatics from the Aurora Order."
Hugues Artois's eyes narrowed, and he lapsed into silence for a couple of seconds.
"Why would the Aurora Order target me?"
"I cannot say." The red-haired lady peered deeply into Hugues Artois's eyes, shaking her head slightly.
While the official Beyonders conducted their investigation, the original campaign team returned to Hugues Artois's office.
The red-haired lady turned her attention to the secretary with gold-rimmed glasses.
"What has Tybalt been involved in recently?" she inquired.
"Due to his chronic illness, he intentionally disposed of his disease-ridden handkerchief and ended the lives of two elderly scavengers who had no children," the secretary with gold-rimmed glasses truthfully replied. "I have managed to keep this matter under wraps."
The red-haired lady muttered to herself, her voice barely audible, "Two childless elderly scavengers... It seems that Tybalt's demise is undeniably targeted at Monsieur Member of Parliament."

Chapter 245: "Speech"

All eyes turned towards Hugues Artois, the distinguished member of parliament, his prominent nose and graying temples giving him an air of refinement. He had quickly regained his composure and wore a smile as he spoke.

"There's no need to fret. If the assailant possessed the means to breach two layers of defense and confront me directly, there would be no reason to go through the trouble of assassinating Tybalt. This seems more like an act of blackmail, a surface-level threat."

The four members of the campaign present nodded simultaneously, coming to the conclusion that Monsieur Member of Parliament's deduction was accurate.

Hugues Artois turned to the lady with red hair.

"Cassandra, my knowledge of mysticism is limited. I have only heard that Beyonders can extract the truth from a deceased soul through spirit channeling. Will Tybalt's spirit betray us?"

Cassandra, with her red hair flowing, slowly shook her head.

"Under normal circumstances, we would have to take the risk of cleansing the situation. However, in the recent attack, the assassin clearly took ample time to obliterate Tybalt's spirit, thereby concealing his own identity. It's equivalent to assisting us."

Hugues Artois nodded slightly and cast a glance at the two anxious secretaries. With a smile, he reassured them.

"Rhône, Margaret, fear not. Time is on our side, and the future lies within our grasp. A minor setback will not hinder the ultimate outcome.

"You must always believe that our actions represent justice."

Rhône, donning gold-rimmed spectacles, and the refined Margaret were bewildered. They couldn't fathom being associated with the concept of "justice."

Not only them, but even Cassandra with her red hair and the middle-aged, muscular Boduva looked at Hugues Artois in confusion, sensing they might have misheard.

Cautiously, Hugues Artois glanced towards the door, silently questioning if anyone might be eavesdropping.

After the red-haired Cassandra nodded, he launched into an impromptu speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, while I may not possess the ability to convert and pray for a boon due to a binding contract, I have acquired a profound understanding of our world.

"You, better than anyone, should be aware that the vast cosmos above us represents an expansive universe. Countless planets exist within it, each akin to its own world. Many of these worlds harbor

their own civilizations. The world we inhabit is but one among an endless expanse, as insignificant as a speck of dust.
"The seven deities have imprisoned us in this realm, preventing us from making contact with the civilizations that thrive in the universe. They desire our blindness and deafness, seeking to keep us enslaved for generations.
"They label these magnificent beings as evil gods. They weave falsehoods, warning us of the peril that lies in believing in these evil gods. Their goal is to prevent us from making contact with these higher civilizations, to keep us confined.
"If the belief in an evil god were genuinely dangerous, why do numerous civilizations in the universe, comprising different species, still exist?
"They are afraid. If these mighty entities were to descend upon our world, They alone would face destruction. Only the saints, angels, and fanatics who follow Them would be affected. For most people, it would merely be a shift in faith, devoid of peril.
"Believing in one of the seven deities is deemed faith, but believing in other great beings is not?
"We can no longer remain captive to the seven deities. We must venture forth into the future of humankind and the course of civilization. From the mere fact that boons can be obtained, these great beings are mightier than the seven deities. They will bestow protection and willingly offer their power. Their divine benevolence is boundless, akin to the vast sea.
"In the days to come, when we navigate the universe and reflect upon the journey we have undertaken, you shall come to comprehend that our cause is one of justice.
"In this process, death is an inevitability, yet those who perish are deserving. They are either aged, feeble, unlucky, or destined to meet such a fate. Most of the blame does not lie with us.
"Furthermore, they constitute only a minority. We cannot impede the majority from seeking refuge with a higher civilization, pursuing a better future.
"Ladies and gentlemen, sacrifices are inherent in any cause. As long as we steadfastly believe that our actions are driven by justice and persist unwaveringly, the future shall unquestionably be ours!
"In a decade's time, humanity will secure a ticket to join the circle of cosmic civilization. We shall no longer be barbarians, hiding in the shadows of obscurity!"
The red-haired Cassandra, Secretary Rhône, and the rest were left dumbfounded.
Who was the true believer of the evil god?
Each had their own reasons for following different evil gods, and

deep down, they knew they had veered onto the wrong path. Nevertheless, they had already set foot on this journey and had no choice but to press forward. Thus, they either used faith as a facade to gradually reshape their understanding, or they completely surrendered themselves, seeking any motivation to propel them onward.

And yet, Hugues Artois, someone who clearly wasn't a believer and hadn't received any favors or undergone significant assimilation, managed to speak such astonishing and captivating words straight from the depths of his heart.

The four members of the campaign were taken aback, realizing the sense behind Hugues Artois' words, causing them to reevaluate the meaning behind their past actions.

After a few moments, the red-haired Cassandra let out a slow exhale. She looked at Hugues Artois and sincerely praised him.

"An exceptional speech, Monsieur Member of Parliament. In the future, when you choose your faith, I can recommend one for you."

"Oh?" Hugues Artois inquired in a nasal voice.

Cassandra smiled and elaborated.

"Among the boons bestowed by that individual is one called Orator."

Hugues Artois nodded and flashed a relaxed smile towards the four members of the team.

"Do not be disheartened by Tybalt's demise. We will remain steadfast in our original plan."

Cassandra, Rhône, Margaret, and Boduva responded in unison.

"Yes, Monsieur Member of Parliament."

...

In the depths of Underground Trier.

Lumian took a detour and returned to the quarry cave. Swiftly, he shed his clothes and shoes, removing the wig and beard that concealed his true appearance.

Once he changed back into his ragged tramp attire and adorned a dark-blue cap, semi-translucent crimson Fire Ravens materialized around him.

The Fire Ravens darted out, alighting upon the cane, shirt, bow tie, wig, and other objects, causing them to erupt in soft explosions of flame.

Lumian, having turned his back, proceeded towards the exit of Underground Trier. Crimson flames surged in his wake, consuming everything related to the previous attack, casting an illuminating glow within the dark cavern below.

...

Around midnight, in the depths of the Eternal Blazing Sun

Inquisition beneath Église Saint-Robert.
Angoulême de François, engrossed in perusing the investigation records, heard a knock on his office door.
His brown coat, adorned with two rows of golden buttons, hung neatly on a coat rack near the entrance. He wore a light golden shirt featuring the emblem of the Sun Sacred Order, along with dark brown pants.
"Please, come in," Angoulême calmly invited.
Valentine, powdered hair and face adorned with subtle makeup, entered the room.
He had been preoccupied with thoughts of Cordu all this time. Upon learning of survivors appearing in the Trier region, he had submitted an application and transferred to this post. His wife and child had long yearned for the bustling city of Trier, so they eagerly moved with him without much persuasion.
He was on night duty with a few teammates and happened to encounter the murder of the member of parliament's assistant secretary.
Valentine, clad in a slim blue tweed coat with a golden brooch, took a seat across from Angoulême and spoke directly.
"Deacon, why haven't we investigated Hugues Artois?
"While most members of the Aurora Order may be crazy, they possess an uncanny ability to detect heretics. Although not every person they target is a believer in the evil gods, at least 70% are.
"Considering the information we've gathered, we can reasonably conclude that Tybalt Jacques, who met his demise tonight, was a heretic and wielded the power of decay. Furthermore, he served as Hugues Artois's assistant secretary.
"We cannot allow a highly suspicious individual to continue serving as a member of parliament. Investigating him is not only a responsibility to the people of the market district, but also to Hugues Artois himself. If we find no evidence of wrongdoing, we can assist him in purging any heretics surrounding him."
Angoulême hadn't anticipated his new team leader to be more devout and zealous than himself. He couldn't help but raise his hand and furrow his brows.
With a bitter smile, he responded.
"Perhaps you are unaware, but every member of parliament has signed a contract with the two Churches and received a notarized contract.
"In this contract, they pledge their faith, display their abilities and associated sources. The two Churches promise not to restrict the personal freedom of any member of parliament or their key staff without substantial and compelling evidence. They won't be

subject to the influence of Beyonders.
"This is to safeguard the authority of the National Convention.
"According to the contract, Hugues Artois believes fervently in the mighty Eternal Blazing Sun and is not a Beyonder.
"Hence, you may question him and his core staff, but that is the extent of it."
Valentine couldn't conceal his disappointment.
"Why is such a contract in place?"
"It is a byproduct of the past coup d'état, a change that accompanied the course of history," Angoulême provided a simple explanation.
Valentine let out a sigh, rose from his seat, and extended his arms.
"Praise the Sun!"
"Praise the Sun!" Angoulême stood up and returned the gesture, watching his subordinate exit the office.
...
Quartier de Noël, Holy Palace Hospital.
Jenna sat upon a small stool, slumped beside her mother Elodie's lightly slumbering form in the hospital bed.
After bidding farewell to Franca and sending her brother Julien home, who had to attend to his factory duties come dawn, Jenna found herself alone. The Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons had yet to resume its acting training, as plans were underway to auction it, along with Auberge du Coq Doré, at the police headquarters. However, the recent explosion at the Goodville Chemical Factory had caused a delay in those proceedings.
Suddenly, Elodie stirred. Jenna startled awake, her eyes fixating on her mother, who gradually opened her own.
Elodie's gaze mirrored the face of her daughter as she mustered a smile.
"I thought I was about to see your father."
Without awaiting Jenna's reply, Elodie inquired, her voice frail, "How are my injuries?"
Jenna, overjoyed to witness her mother awaken from her coma, beamed genuinely and responded, "They're not severe. Look, no surgery is required."
Elodie heaved a sigh of relief and nodded slowly.
Still recovering from her coma, her body and mind weren't yet in their prime state. After a brief exchange, she drifted back into slumber.
Jenna clasped her mother's hand and beheld the contentment that graced the wrinkled, gray-haired countenance beneath the gentle illumination streaming in from the window.
Observing for a while longer, she glanced upward and caught sight

of the first rays of dawn gradually painting the sky with light.

Chapter 246: Resolution

As the first rays of dawn illuminated the room, Lumian slowly opened his eyes, awakened by the gentle chime of bells from Église Saint-Robert.

The previous night, he had stayed at Auberge du Coq Doré.

He raised his right hand to touch his head. His bald head had grown thick and healthy hair once more.

Leaving the comfort of his bed, Lumian walked over to the full-length mirror and saw a reflection that looked both familiar and unfamiliar.

Back in Cordu, his hair had never been dyed golden.

But in the morning light, he couldn't help but smile, feeling better than he had in a long time.

At the very least, he didn't meet with failure with everything he did. Killing and taking revenge didn't pose a problem.

After breakfast at a street vendor, Lumian planned to find a barbershop in either Quartier de l'Observatoire or Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative to revert his hair color to golden. But before he could set out, hurried footsteps approached his room.

He braced himself, thinking someone might kick the door open, but instead, there was a knock.

It was Franca, who rarely rose so early. She couldn't hide her surprise upon seeing Lumian's pure black hair.

"You dyed it back?" she exclaimed.

"Sort of," Lumian replied, observing Franca as she entered Room 207 and closed the door behind her.

Without mincing words, Franca confronted him, "Did you kill Hugues Artois's assistant secretary? And did you rush to advance to Pyromaniac last night?"

Lumian stood up, smiling.

"Yes."

Franca was momentarily at a loss for words with the frank admission.

After a few seconds, she hissed and said, "You brat, you promised me you would hold back and endure, but the very next moment, you went ahead without hesitation. You really can't suppress your hatred for a night, can you?

"If you keep going like this, I seriously doubt you'll survive this year —no, this month!"

Lumian explained simply, "Actually, I didn't intend to kill Tybalt last night. I merely wanted to monitor him, gather information, and plan a proper approach to deal with him together with you. But an opportunity presented itself, and it was too good to pass up.

I couldn't convince myself to hold back."
"Right, I made preparations in all aspects, including measures against divination and tracking."
Relieved, Franca asked, "That Tybalt guy seemed weak. Was it easy for you to handle him?"
"He mainly transmitted diseases through contact, and Pyromaniacs happened to counter that ability. If not for my anti-divination and anti-spirit channeling preparations, I could have taken care of him in ten seconds," Lumian recalled.
Franca sighed, admitting, "You got lucky. Have you considered the possibility that your target might be much stronger?"
"My initial judgment was that he wouldn't be too formidable. If he exceeded a certain threshold, I was prepared to use my dirk," Lumian replied before asking, "Why are you up so early?"
"Gardner woke me up!" Franca replied with gritted teeth. "He instructed me to gather the leaders of the Savoie Mob and find the person responsible for killing Hugues Artois's assistant secretary. When I heard the details, I knew it had to be you! I told you last night to get in the right condition before drinking the Pyromaniac potion, but you went ahead and consumed it anyway."
Lumian spoke earnestly, his voice filled with sincerity. "I believed that I was in the perfect state to advance to Pyromaniac, so I swiftly concocted the potion. Will Boss suspect me?"
"For now, no," Franca replied, shaking her head. "Besides yourself, nobody expected you to consume the potion last night. Moreover, you cunningly framed the Aurora Order. Gardner doesn't see any motive in you."
Franca glanced at Lumian's head and suggested, "Come here, I'll help you restore your original hair color. It's best not to make any changes during a time like this to avoid arousing suspicion."
"Alright," Lumian agreed, feeling delighted to save some money.
...
In the morning, the ward buzzed with more activity compared to the somberness of the night. Echoing through the air were the cries of those being carried away, the presence of relatives escorting loved ones back home, and the determination of some patients who defied the cries, choosing to depart from the hospital's confines.
Jenna and Elodie—who had regained consciousness—observed the scene in silence. They understood the painful reality unfolding before them.
Not everyone could bear the weight of insurmountable medical expenses, nor did they wish to drag their families into the depths of despair.

Sometimes, the patient surrendered while the family persisted. Other times, it was the family that gave up, leaving the patient with no choice but to accept their fate. At times, patient and family would tacitly leave the ward, exchange silent glances, and be unable to hold back their tears as they cried or wailed.

After a while, as the ward regained a semblance of tranquility, Elodie, who had managed to sit up, whispered softly, "How long will I have to stay here for treatment?"

Jenna pondered for a moment before deciding to tell her mother the truth. It was an impossible matter to conceal. The doctors' rounds, treatments, and further examinations would inevitably reveal some information. Besides, Elodie would piece it together based on her physical condition and the fact that she hadn't been discharged after several days.

Organizing her thoughts, Jenna explained, "The doctor said you'll be here for months, possibly even half a year. Your external injuries aren't severe, but your body has suffered significant damage. Unless you make a full recovery, your condition may worsen."

Before Elodie could respond, Jenna smiled reassuringly and continued, "I've already secured the funds for your treatment. I borrowed the money from Franca. She has no shortage of resources. She promised Julien and me that we could repay it in two to three years, in installments. By then, Dad's accident compensation will surely have been paid. There may even be hope for yours."

Elodie's expression faltered for a moment. After a few seconds, she spoke with weariness in her voice, "Why will it take so long..."

"With such a massive explosion and the chemical gasses, it's a miracle that you survived," Jenna said before asking. "What exactly happened back then?"

Elodie contemplated for a moment and replied wearily, "I don't know. The explosion happened so suddenly, and I lost consciousness.

"I think it originated near the metal tank. Sigh, many of the factory's facilities are old and prone to breakdowns. They require repairs, but the boss refuses to invest in replacements. Sigh..."

After chatting for a while, Jenna noticed her mother's energy waning. She advised Elodie to rest for a while and headed towards the washroom at the end of the corridor.

As soon as Elodie witnessed Jenna's departure from the ward, she mustered all her strength, disconnected the IV, and leaned against the wall for support. Gasping for breath, she took two steps towards the ward diagonally opposite, where doctors and nurses

meticulously examined each injured individual.
Elodie located the doctor, provided her ward and bed number, and inquired, "How long will my treatment last?"
The doctor leafed through his records and responded, "We don't have all the results yet, but we estimate it will take about five to seven months."
"What will be the cost of treatment each month?" Elodie inquired.
The doctor pondered for a moment and replied, "Let's wait for the complete assessment. If all goes well, it should amount to around 200 verl d'or per week. As treatment progresses, the cost will decrease. However, if your condition isn't too favorable, it might range from 300 to 400 verl d'or per week. Furthermore, even after you leave the hospital, you must prioritize rest and avoid exerting yourself."
Elodie found herself rendered speechless. The nurse assisted her back to the ward and reinserted the needle into her arm.
Shortly before noon, Julien rushed into the ward, his concern for his mother evident in his eyes.
After conversing with him for a while, Jenna announced, "I'll go to the hospital cafeteria and bring back some food for you."
With that, she departed the ward, moving briskly as she descended the stairs.
Thanks to Lumian's guidance, Jenna had come to realize that she possessed extraordinary abilities as a Beyonder. She was no longer an ordinary individual. With a willingness to take calculated risks, she had numerous avenues to earn money.
Consequently, the expenses for Elodie's treatment and the overwhelming debt held no power over her. The fact that her mother had been saved was cause for celebration, a reason to extol the sun.
In the ward, Elodie gazed at Julien, who sat beside her, and posed a question with a tender expression, "You're nearly 23, aren't you?"
"That's right," Julien replied, a smile gracing his face. "I've been a provider for the family for quite some time now. But in your eyes, I'm still a youngling."
Elodie offered a faint smile and spoke, "That's because my criteria for true adulthood differ from others. I've always believed that one can only be considered an adult when they possess a skill that consistently earns them money. You're still a year away from that, and Celia has another year and a half to go.
"You've endured so much these past few years."
"It was you who endured," Julien responded with a sigh. "Before I could truly assist, you worked three jobs a day for a whole year, from 6 a.m. until midnight."

Emotions surged within him, causing him to blurt out, "We'll definitely cure you!"
Elodie chuckled in delight, her hand gently caressing her flaxen hair.
"Unfortunately, my wig is gone.
"And your sister. She previously deceived us, claiming that the theater required her to dye her hair a brownish-yellow shade. In reality, it was to prevent herself from being recognized when she went to sing at the dance hall. I don't know what to do with her.
"Sigh, I truly don't want you to shoulder more debt. It will waste years. By then, you won't be young anymore..."
Julien swiftly consoled his mother, assuring her that he excelled at his job and would undoubtedly receive a salary increase next year.
After rambling for a few minutes, Elodie clutched her chest and beseeched Julien, "I'm not feeling well. Please find a doctor for me."
"Okay." Julien stood up abruptly and dashed out of the room.
Elodie promptly removed the IV needle and stumbled toward the ward's window, relying on the nearby beds for support.
Meanwhile, on the first floor of Holy Palace Hospital.
Jenna emerged from the cafeteria, carrying a wooden lunch box, and began her journey up the staircase.
Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she witnessed a figure hurtling downwards, resulting in a resounding thud.
Jenna's heart skipped a beat, her mind filled with unease. Hastily, she turned around, uncertain about the source of her apprehension. She dashed out of the hall and approached the spot where the person had jumped, maneuvering through the gathering crowd.
In the next instant, she beheld a crimson liquid seeping and a familiar face adorned with delicate wrinkles.
With a thud, the lunch box slipped from her grasp, crashing onto the ground. Her eyes grew vacant, reflecting a vivid red.
The lifeless body belonged to her mother, Elodie.
The person who had leaped from the building was her mother, Elodie.

Chapter 247: Instigation

In the café on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise,

Lumian finished his lunch and caught sight of Franca once more. She was attired in a white shirt, light-colored breeches, and vibrant red boots.

This time, her countenance was grave, causing an uneasiness to settle upon Louis, Sarkota, and the other gangsters. They feared that trouble might accompany her arrival.

Lumian rose from his seat, casting an inquisitive gaze in her direction.

Franca exhaled slowly and spoke, her tone weighted with solemnity.

"Jenna's mother passed away."

Lumian was taken aback, as though he had witnessed Flameng's lifeless body dangling from a window frame or Ruhr decaying to the bone.

His eyes narrowed, and his hands clenched into fists. After a few moments, he inquired, "Was it due to her declining condition?"

"No," Franca shook her head. "It was suicide."

Observing Lumian's perplexed expression, she sighed and elaborated, "Last night, when I sought out Jenna, I worried that she might put up a brave facade and keep her difficulties concealed or seek our assistance, so I made a point to meet the attending physician and the nurses responsible for her mother's care. I treated them to coffee and dessert, urging them to keep a close watch on Jenna's mother. I arranged for them to notify me immediately of any complications, and I pledged to cover any necessary expenses.

"They informed me that upon learning about the months-long treatment and its approximate cost, Jenna's mother took advantage of Jenna's visit to the cafeteria and Julien's absence in search of a doctor. She leaped from the sixth floor...

"Alas, her health was already frail, and she perished instantly upon impact."

Lumian fell into a pensive silence. Suddenly, he pressed his left chest and sneered, "Is this fate?"

Franca couldn't provide an answer.

...

At 1 p.m., Lumian and Franca arrived at the Holy Palace Hospital. The nurse, whom Franca had deliberately befriended, guided them to the Farewell Sanctuary, situated on the ground floor of an annex.

The place was known as the Farewell Sanctuary, where the

departed awaited their purification.
Julien, Jenna's brother, sat by the door, his head in his hands, wearing a pained expression as he stared at the sky-blue-painted wall opposite.
Approaching him, Franca asked in a hushed voice, "Are Auntie and Jenna inside?"
Julien nodded slowly and whispered to himself in anguish, "I shouldn't have left her alone in the ward...
"I shouldn't have left her alone in the ward..."
Franca didn't know how to console him; all she could do was sigh and enter the Farewell Sanctuary alongside Julien.
Elodie's body lay on a bed covered by a white sheet, concealed beneath a plain white cloth.
The blood on her body had been cleansed. Her face appeared pallid, and her eyes were tightly shut.
Jenna sat on a stool across from her mother, her gaze empty and her voice absent, as if her soul had departed.
Franca called out, a mix of pain and concern in her tone, but Jenna ignored her, as if she had encased herself in another realm.
Lumian pulled up a chair and seated himself next to Jenna, his gaze also fixed upon the lifeless figure of Elodie.
After a few seconds, he spoke in a deep voice, "I understand what you're feeling. Not long ago, I, too, lost the family member who meant the most to me."
Jenna remained silent, as if she had transformed into a statue.
Lumian directed his gaze toward the same direction as Jenna and continued, "But you need to know who is responsible for this tragedy.
"Is it your fault? Is it your mother's fault? Is it your brother's fault?
"No, you did nothing wrong! Faced with accidents and debts, you chose to endure them with determination. You chose to rely on your own labor and suffering to secure a new life. It took you several years to emerge from it slowly. Is that wrong? No!
"This time, you didn't abandon your loved one. You fought hard to find a solution. Is that wrong? No!
"You didn't hide anything from your mother. You informed her about the duration of the treatment, the costs, and the source of funding. Is that wrong? No! There was no way to conceal it!
"Your mother loves you and wants you to avoid reliving the painful past few years. She wants you to walk in the light, not in darkness. Is that wrong? No!
"Who is at fault?
"It's the factory owner who continuously appeals and delays the compensation for the accident, subjecting you to years of painful

and oppressive existence!
"It's the laws that protect their actions!
"It's Bono Goodville, who disregards safety regulations and fails to replace worn-out machines!
"It's the exorbitant cost of treatment that plunges the less fortunate into despair!
"It's the National Convention and the government who have caused all of this!"
Jenna's expression finally shifted, a glimmer of pain surfacing in her vacant eyes and impassive face.
Lumian turned towards the door, his voice resonating with depth as he spoke, "I have something else to say. Perhaps the explosion at Goodville Chemical Factory, which led to your mother's tragic fate, wasn't an accident."
Jenna instinctively turned to face Lumian and Franca.
Lumian directed his gaze towards Elodie's corpse.
"Perhaps it was a murder, a sacrificial offering to an evil deity.
"Our Honorable Member of Parliament, Hugues Artois, has been assessed by the Blessed of powerful evil gods as an open-minded individual. He is surrounded by heretics, including Tybalt Jacques, the assistant secretary responsible for spreading diseases and taking innocent lives.
"Yesterday morning, Bono Goodville paid a visit to the parliament member's office, and by evening, his chemical plant had exploded.
"When I encountered Tybalt Jacques in the guise of Bono Goodville, he mentioned something about unavoidable troubles following an organization's decay. It convinced me that the chemical plant explosion was something they eagerly anticipated. It might have been orchestrated with a specific purpose that remains unknown to us.
"Are you consumed by anger? Do you feel a burning hatred? Can you accept this?
"Do you wish to sit here and watch as the murderers responsible for your mother's death and the destruction of your happiness revel in champagne, indulge in dance parties, and inflict more heartbreak on innocent families?"
Jenna's expression twisted slightly, as if she grappled with conflicting emotions within.
Eventually, she raised her hands to cover her face, weeping bitterly.
"But my mother... she cannot be brought back..."
Franca crouched down before Jenna and embraced her, allowing her tears to flow freely. As Jenna wept, Franca offered her guidance, "What your mother desires most is for both you and your

brother to be free from the burdens of debt and to embark on a fresh new life. She wishes for one of you to become a remarkable stage actress, while the other escapes the constraints of ordinary labor and masters a particular skill. She yearns for you to live well. Can you bear to disappoint her?"
Jenna sobbed and asked, "But isn't it said that the night will pass and light will emerge? Why? Why is it always so dark? Why can't I see any light..."
"It will come, it will come," Franca repeated, patting Jenna's back soothingly. "What you must do now is to give your mother a proper burial and consider doing something meaningful in her honor."
"Okay," Jenna agreed tearfully.
She wept until exhaustion overtook her, finally finding stability within her emotions.
At that moment, the clergyman from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, who had come to offer his final words of solace, arrived.
Clad in a white robe adorned with intricate golden threads, he entered the room alongside Julien and positioned himself beside Elodie's lifeless body.
In one hand, he grasped the Holy Bible and recited a prayer, while the other hand held a suspended bottle of holy water.
Eventually, a beam of sunlight, accompanied by the holy water, materialized from thin air and gently bathed Elodie.
"Praise the Sun. May this sister find peace and enter the realm of God." The clergyman extended his arms.
"Praise the Sun!" Jenna and Julien joined in prayer.
Observing the ceremony, Lumian bowed his head and silently scoffed.
Franca, a devout follower of the God of Steam and Machinery, refrained from praising the Sun as well.
With the purification ritual concluded, the priest departed from the Farewell Sanctuary. In his place, the administrator in charge of the Holy Palace Hospital morgue entered and posed a question to Julien and Jenna, "Should we proceed with burial or cremation for this sister? Shall we send her to the catacombs, Cimetière des Innocents, or Cimetière des Prêtres?"
Julien and Jenna exchanged glances before responding, "Cremation. We'll personally escort her to the catacombs."
Their father also rested there.
The morgue administrator made a notation and added, "There have been numerous casualties from last night. The crematorium won't be available until next week. Would you like this sister to remain in the morgue for the time being?"
"Very well." Jenna's voice trembled slightly.

And so, the four of them watched as Elodie's visage was veiled with a white cloth and her body was gently guided out of the Farewell Sanctuary.
They trailed behind the wheeled bed, descending through the steam-powered elevator into the subterranean realm until they arrived outside the morgue.
The morgue door gleamed in a silvery-gray hue, while the interior emanated an eerie coldness, producing a misty white fog at the intersection.
Jenna stood in a daze as her mother, Elodie, was propelled through the door, vanishing into the frigid chamber filled with metallic cabinets illuminated by gas-powered wall lamps. She remained fixated as the silver-gray door slowly shut.
Unconsciously, she took a few steps forward, halting at the threshold.
Silently, the door closed.
Her mother was now forever beyond her sight.
...
As they returned to Passy Bridge in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Jenna's eyes fixed on her brother Julien, who walked ahead of her with a heavy heart. Sorrow engulfed her as the bright afternoon sun blinded her vision.
Franca averted her gaze from Julien's retreating form and contemplated finding a task to occupy Jenna's mind.
"Your brother is emotionally distressed. It seems he blames himself. Offer him guidance in the upcoming days and assure him that it wasn't his fault. Any ordinary person would have hurriedly sought a doctor."
Jenna momentarily snapped out of her sorrow and tersely acknowledged, "I'll counsel him. But what if it doesn't work?"
She glanced at Lumian and Franca, her expression filled with helplessness.
Franca nodded reassuringly.
"When the time comes, I can assist him in finding a genuine Psychiatrist—one with Beyonder abilities."
Jenna let out a sigh of relief, her nose sniffing with gratitude.
"Thank you. Thank you both."
Lumian, drawing from his own experiences, reminded her, "You must also attend to your own mental well-being."
Jenna pressed her lips together and nodded, her gaze gradually transforming into one of determination.
In a hushed, raspy voice, she addressed Franca and Lumian, "Tonight, I intend to pay a 'visit' to Bono Goodville."

Chapter 248: Visitors

In Quartier des Thermes, at 55 Rue Chestnut, stood a three-story building tinged with a grayish-blue hue. It boasted a delightful garden, a well-kept lawn, and even stables.

Within the establishment, a band played a melodic tune from a corner. Bono Goodville, the owner of this fine establishment, gracefully navigated through the guests with a glass of golden champagne in hand. Engaging in conversations about the aftermath of the chemical plant explosion, he cunningly aimed to evade his responsibilities while securing a substantial compensation from the insurance company.

Between his interactions, he chatted with the wife of a government official, conferred with his lawyer, and sought out influential figures relevant to the matter at hand.

Like a natural social butterfly, he effortlessly flitted from one person to another, exhibiting wit and vigor amidst the elegant setting. The light from the crystal chandelier illuminated his dark-blue eyes and thick brown beard, lending them a captivating sparkle.

As he gracefully maneuvered around an unassuming guest, Bono Goodville unexpectedly encountered Travis Everett.

The superintendent of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman was not in uniform that evening. Clad in a sleek black suit paired with a stylish blue bow tie, he held a glass of light golden champagne in his hand.

"Superintendent Everett, it is imperative that you ensure my protection during this trying time!" Bono Goodville smiled at Travis Everett, expressing his concerns. "The explosion claimed many lives, and I fear their bereaved relatives might resort to drastic measures."

Everett adjusted his black-framed glasses and returned the smile.

"Ah, you see, Quartier des Thermes falls beyond my jurisdiction. Moreover, once I stepped onto this street, it became evident that the frequency and intensity of police patrols have notably increased."

"Indeed, but didn't you hire numerous bodyguards? What is there to worry about? Those who perished were ordinary workers. They pose no threat to you. Furthermore, they are unaware of your place of residence."

Everett jestingly remarked, his tone lighthearted.

"But if the injured and their families discover that you continue to host a lavish banquet, serving fine wine while being serenaded by a small accompanying symphony band, their anguish might drive

them to madness. They could drag you and your family into the depths of despair."
Bono Goodville sheepishly smiled and replied, "The banquet is unrelated to compensation. I must adhere to the law and await judgment."
"Superintendent Everett, if I were to return to the market district to handle matters, I humbly request your assistance in assigning two or three police officers to protect me."
Everett gently nodded.
"That is my duty, but I must remind you that several police officers' families are employed at your chemical plant."
Implicitly, he emphasized the urgency of compensating his subordinates, hoping for a swift resolution.
Bono Goodville nodded silently, seemingly unaffected.
The banquet continued into the early hours of the morning. Amidst the lingering fragrance, Bono Goodville bid farewell to his three children, embracing each one before ascending to the third floor.
Untying his bow tie, he entered the bedroom with his wife, ready to retire for the night.
With a flick, the gas wall lamp ignited, casting a soft glow that reflected in Bono Goodville's wide eyes.
There, in his cherished recliner, sat an unexpected guest.
Although seated, the man leaned forward, exuding an air of superiority that made Bono Goodville feel small and insignificant.
Clad in a worker's uniform of muted grayish-blue, complete with a dark-blue cap, his face concealed behind swaths of white bandages, leaving only his piercing blue eyes and a glimpse of his nostrils visible.
Bono Goodville's heart raced, his instinct urging him to scream for help.
However, before a sound could escape his lips, a phantom-like crimson flaming raven materialized behind the "surprise" visitor. With a swift swoop, it crashed into Bono Goodville's teeth.
A soft bang resonated as Bono Goodville's mouth seared with pain, and two teeth clattered to the ground. Agony distorted his features, stifling his cry.
At that precise moment, a pair of sharp daggers pressed against the backs of both Bono Goodville and his wife.
Emerging from the shadows of the doorway, Franca and Jenna closed the bedroom door behind them, effectively trapping their captives.
One of them donned a black robe with a concealed hood and leather armor, her face veiled by darkness. The other sported a

man's linen shirt, a brown jacket, dark brown trousers, and laceless leather boots. A silver-white metal mask adorned her upper face, leaving only her eyes exposed.
Franca used her free hand to steady Bono Goodville, preventing him from collapsing in agony.
Maintaining his seated posture, Lumian grinned.
"Monsieur Goodville, consider that a warning. It could have been much worse. Those two missing teeth and minor injuries are nothing compared to what could have transpired."
Bono Goodville's wife snapped out of her daze, her voice trembling with fear as she asked, "Who are you? What do you want?"
"Who am I?" Lumian chuckled, a hint of mischief in his tone. "You may consider me your father."
With a glance toward Franca, she retrieved the truth serum Lumian had provided earlier and administered it to Bono Goodville.
As Lumian awaited the serum's effects, he maintained his smile and continued, "Monsieur Goodville, I had hoped for a more challenging encounter, but instead, here we are, having a pleasant conversation. You disappoint me."
He hadn't received a boon!
Under the influence of the truth serum, Bono Goodville wore a bitter expression as he mustered the courage to ask, "What do you want? I have a considerable sum of money in my safe. I can give it to you!"
Jenna's anger flared up, surging from her chest to her head.
In a sudden motion, she raised her left foot and delivered a swift kick to Bono Goodville's calf.
Oh, how she longed to strike him where it truly hurt, but circumstances prevented her from doing so!
Dammit, take your money to the catacombs!
Bono Goodville's body leaned, and the sound of bones cracking reached his ears.
Before his instinctual scream could escape, frost materialized, sealing his voice.
Lumian nodded in approval, acknowledging Jenna's actions. Once Bono Goodville had regained composure, Lumian spoke, "I want to know why you orchestrated the detonation at your own chemical plant."
Bono Goodville's expression transformed, and he blurted out, "How did you find out?"
Before he could finish his sentence, he wished to raise his right hand and slap himself.
Shouldn't he have denied the accusation first? *Why did he utter his*

thoughts so recklessly?
"Well, well, you are quite forthcoming. I was merely testing you, and you readily confessed," Lumian remarked, his tone almost causing Bono Goodville's brain to seize.
Jenna felt as if her soul had vacated her body.
Though Lumian's analysis had mentally prepared her, hearing the admission still left her in disbelief.
Could there truly exist such a wicked individual?
Hundreds of families were devastated!
Snapping out of her stupor, Jenna clenched her teeth tightly,
fearing that any relaxation might ignite her anger, prompting her to stab Bono Goodville.
No, it would be hundreds of stabs!
Goodville's wife also stared at her husband in a state of shock and fear.
She had believed the explosion at the chemical plant to be a mere accident.
Lumian cast a cold gaze upon Bono Goodville and questioned, "Why did you do it? Does it have any connection to someone within Hugues Artois' office?"
Upon hearing the latter inquiry, Bono Goodville could not contain his astonishment and dread.
After consuming the peculiar liquid and "confessing" to orchestrating the chemical plant explosion, Bono Goodville's psychological defenses crumbled. In that moment, an overwhelming urge consumed him—to drag someone down with him and share the burden of his sins.
"It's Rhône and Tybalt! They are Secretary and Assistant Secretary to Member of Parliament Hugues Artois.
"They have been dropping hints that the chemical plant has been deteriorating for years and could explode at any given moment. I thought I might as well find a way to cash in on the insurance compensation I had purchased in the past. And when the time came, Member of Parliament Hugues Artois would use the excuse of setting up a factory to boost the economy and protect the interests of the factory owner, thereby securing funds for reconstruction and compensation.
"They kept saying that everything decays. My chemical plant was no exception, so I anticipated various problems. Instead of waiting for it to explode naturally, I decided to exchange it for greater benefits.
"I visited them again yesterday morning. For some reason, I was foolish enough to be convinced by their words. When the explosion actually occurred, I grew fearful and went to the member of

parliament's office thrice.
"They assured me everything would be fine."
What an idiot. He's not even a heretic... *Could superpowers have influenced him?* Tybalt had also mentioned decay when he saw me disguised as Bono Goodville. *What is their true agenda?* Lumian pondered for a moment, about to inquire further about the conversation, when the sound of a doorbell being pulled suddenly resonated from the iron gate outside the lawn.
Lumian and Franca exchanged swift glances, both coming up with guesses.
To arrive at such an hour, ringing the doorbell politely, it could only be either a friend or an official investigator seeking Bono Goodville!
Without uttering a word, Lumian rose to his feet, and Franca sheathed her dagger in silence.
Jenna reacted instantly, comprehending their intentions.
Taking a diagonal step, she raised her dagger high and thrust it into Bono Goodville's shoulder.
Blood spurted forth as Bono Goodville let out a pained grunt.
Jenna didn't linger. She dashed towards the window opposite the main entrance.
On her dagger, black flames ignited and swiftly extinguished in several spots within the room.
The trio leaped out of the building, vaulted over the iron fence bordering the garden, and vanished into the encompassing night.
...
Inside the bedroom, a three-person team consisting of Angoulême, Valentine, and the mixed-blood Imre confronted Bono Goodville, who had just finished bandaging his scorched mouth.
The factory owner seethed with anger as he addressed them, "Officer, I was nearly abducted by three criminals!"
Angoulême surveyed the scene, a smile playing on his lips.
"We will investigate that matter later. For now, the primary problem lies with you."
"My problem?" Bono Goodville grew alarmed.
Angoulême nodded slightly.
"Let us first confirm your faith before delving into your visit to the member of parliament's office on the morning of the chemical plant explosion."
With insufficient evidence to take drastic measures against the member of parliament and his staff, the Purifiers redirected their investigation towards Bono Goodville.
Upon hearing these words, Bono Goodville, his psychological defenses shattered, paled in apprehension.

Chapter 249: Loophole in the Contract

Observing Bono Goodville's reaction, Angoulême's confidence grew a little.

With a swift motion, he withdrew a pen and paper, preparing to draft a Notary Certificate. The concept behind it was for Bono Goodville to swear an oath to a deity, ensuring his honesty during the subsequent questioning.

As Angoulême affixed his signature, the paper emitted a radiant golden glow.

Bono Goodville swallowed nervously, feeling the weight of the situation.

In recent years, as a well-known factory owner in Trier, he had encountered mystic knowledge and extraordinary powers that surpassed the imagination of ordinary folk. Such matters were not unfamiliar to him. It was akin to one of the three abductors blasting him with a flaming raven, another conjuring black flames, and a third leaping from the third floor.

"Sign your name," Angoulême instructed, handing Bono Goodville the Notary Certificate, now devoid of its golden glow.

"Very well." Bono Goodville's right hand trembled as he inscribed his name upon the pledge.

With each stroke, a flash of golden light emanated from his penmanship.

Once he finished, Angoulême spoke in a deep, commanding voice.

"Which deity do you believe in?"

"The God of Steam and Machinery." For Bono Goodville, this question held no challenge.

Angoulême proceeded to the next inquiry.

"Why did you visit the member of parliament's office on the morning of the chemical plant explosion?"

Bono Goodville hesitated for two seconds. Fearful of supernatural powers and divine witnesses, he repeated what he had divulged to Lumian and the others under the influence of the remaining truth serum.

Angoulême, Valentine, and Imre took turns posing questions, allowing Bono Goodville to reconstruct his conversation with the Member of Parliament's secretary, Rhône, and his assistant secretary, Tybalt, as accurately as possible.

When the inquiry concluded, Angoulême delivered the verdict to Bono Goodville.

"You shall be arrested for arson, deliberate detonation of an explosion, and murder. Your assets will be temporarily frozen pending compensation for the deceased and injured."

Bono Goodville's face drained of color as he slumped into the recliner, utterly depleted.
Valentine took a couple of steps towards the door, casting a glance at the corridor beyond. Lowering his voice, he proposed, "Deacon, after we bring this blasphemous scoundrel to the police headquarters, shall we formally apprehend Hugues Artois's secretary, Rhône?"
Angoulême sighed, shaking his head slowly.
"Not yet.
"Did you not notice? Rhône and the late Tybalt were exceedingly cautious. They never explicitly suggested that Bono Goodville instigated the explosion at his chemical plant. They merely insinuated their support for the member of parliament's policies and preached a philosophy of decay. They might exploit Bono Goodville's blinded mind, misconstruing their words to justify his actions.
"It has been nearly two days, and finding any traces of Bono Goodville being influenced by superpowers is proving challenging.
"Put simply, we lack sufficient evidence to apprehend Secretary Rhône and employ Beyonder powers in the interrogation. We can only summon and question him through conventional means."
Valentine seethed with anger, but he realized there was nothing he could do.
He harbored an unwavering certainty that something was awry with the member of parliament's secretary, yet due to regulations, he couldn't employ mystical methods to confront him.
After a brief pause, he glanced at Bono Goodville, sprawled on the recliner like a heap of decaying meat, and spoke with a deep voice, "I suggest we deliver him to the stake!"
Angoulême nodded, addressing Valentine and Imre, "Let us proceed. Take this man back to the market district, where he deserves to meet his end in ten different manners."
Valentine was taken aback.
"Deacon, aren't we going to track down the three Beyonders who infiltrated this place?"
Angoulême chuckled. "Why should we?"
Valentine gazed at him, perplexed by his deacon's approach.
Imre, accustomed to his ways, whispered, "The three Beyonders infiltrated this place without pillaging or harming anyone. They merely sought information about the chemical plant explosion and the visit to the member of parliament's office. It's evident they possess a genuine interest in Secretary Rhône and Member of Parliament Hugues Artois."
"I even wonder if they're from the Aurora Order, and one of them is

the one who killed Assistant Secretary Tybalt."
Angoulême chuckled and added, "Since we are barred from thoroughly investigating the member of parliament's office due to contracts and regulations, why not allow untamed Beyonders, equally keen on prying and employing violence, to squeeze out the pus and expose it to the sunlight?"
"Wouldn't that pose a problem?" Valentine blurted out.
Amused, Angoulême responded, "Of course not. When dealing with cunning individuals adept at exploiting regulations, we must be even more cunning and find loopholes. If need be, we can even collaborate with secret organizations and unite with wild Beyonders.
"The contracts we hold with members of parliament and high-ranking officials only limit certain actions; they don't prohibit us from harboring ill intentions or cultivating informants among untamed Beyonders. Such contracts don't constrain the actions of untamed Beyonders.
"Likewise, these contracts mainly serve as restrictions. They don't compel us to take certain actions. Sometimes, we can observe events unfold without transgressing the contract while handling things in the usual manner.
"Valentine, even beneath the sun, shadows abound. Consider everyone's shadows, for instance. You must learn to coexist with them. At times, you must eliminate them, and at others, utilize them to extol the Sun!"
Valentine recalled his collaboration with Lumian in Cordu and reluctantly embraced the deacon's words. He extended his arms and replied, "Praise the Sun!"
Angoulême added, "I did not craft these words. Ever since Emperor Roselle's demise, the two Churches, parliament, the government, the military, and Bureau 8 have been embroiled in conflicts. Each has amassed considerable combat experience that would not be deemed aboveboard in any other context.
"Hence, why do you think I silently permit the presence of wild Beyonders amidst the mobs of the market district? Based solely on the reassurances and rhetoric of the superintendents? No, I merely believe they may prove useful at some point.
"Of course, it is everyone's responsibility to tolerate the convergence of heretics into a large mob. I am no exception. There are advantages and disadvantages to everything."
Valentine contemplated in silence, refraining from further inquiries.
Similar tensions were apparent in Riston Province, although they paled in comparison to those in Trier. After all, this was the

heartland of the nation.
...
During their journey from Underground Trier to the market district, Lumian, having removed his bandages, cast a glance at the silent Jenna and casually remarked, "I thought you'd dispatch Bono Goodville on the spot, subjecting him to unforgettable torment even if he became a ghost. Who would've guessed you'd merely stab him in the shoulder?"
Jenna pursed her lips and took a few steps ahead before responding in a hushed voice, "If he dies now, the legal process for accident compensation will drag on for years. It might even be symbolic..."
Though she no longer cared, many people still awaited justice.
Franca subtly nodded and added, "Fear not. Bono Goodville will undoubtedly face the death penalty. The only question is the means. Besides, we have left clues for the official Beyonders. Just as we shield Hugues Artois, we shall always assist in eliminating hidden dangers."
Jenna offered a sad smile.
"That's the member of parliament we elected. His secretary and assistant secretary greeted us with an enormous explosion intentionally."
"Are you afraid?" Lumian mockingly inquired.
Jenna fell silent, momentarily at a loss for words.
Lumian pressed on, "I have never relished the benefits of Intis, nor have I cast a vote. Should I encounter a similar situation, I would not spare the member of parliament's secretary or even the president who governs this country!
"My sister once said that blood alone can repay blood. I care not for the identity of the bleeding individual."
Jenna's expression contorted once more, and she spoke with a tinge of anguish, "My mother always taught me to be kind and embrace forgiveness. I cannot allow suffering and hatred to dictate my life. That way, I shall never see the light..."
Without waiting for Lumian and Franca to respond, she lowered her head and gritted her teeth.
"But I despise it so much!"
Lumian pursed his lips and stated, "If you eliminate all your enemies, your life shall not be governed by hatred."
Jenna fell silent for a few seconds before giving a terse nod.
"At the very least, at the very least, I shall not let Secretary Rhône off the hook!
Franca promptly commended her, "Very good. Maintain this resolve."

She then emphasized, "Of course, revenge cannot be blind or impulsive. You must wait until you are strong enough and seize the opportune moment to act. Otherwise, you shall only bring more harm to your family and friends. Furthermore, you will have to witness your enemy living a good life."
"Alright," Jenna softly replied, nodding.
...
Late at night, Jenna, clad in her usual attire, returned to her home at 17 Rue Pasteur in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, her emotions in disarray.
This place was situated near Rue Saint-Hilaire in the market district and the multitude of factories south of Quartier du Jardin Botanique. Previously, Jenna's family had opted to rent this place for the convenience of Elodie and Julien's work.
Upon opening the door, Jenna was greeted by the sight of her brother, Julien, crouched by the window, his head buried in his hands.
Her heart sank, and her voice quivered as she inquired, "Julien, what's the matter?"
Illuminated by the crimson moonlight, Julien leaned against the old wooden table, wearing an expression of terror.
"Don't fire me! Don't fire me!
"My mother passed away. She really passed away. That's why I didn't come to the factory this afternoon...
"Don't fire me! Don't fire me!
"Mom, Mom, it's all my fault. I shouldn't have left you alone in the ward!
"It's all on me, entirely!
"Sob!"
Julien broke into tears, resembling a frightened child.
It seemed as though he had lost his sanity.
Jenna stood in the darkness at the doorway, gazing blankly at her brother. It felt as though she was slowly descending into an unfathomable abyss.

Chapter 250: Condolence Banquet

Julien's sobs reverberated through the room, bathed in the glow of the moon. Jenna stood hesitantly by the door, unwilling to take a single step forward.

Fear gripped her—fear that stepping inside would confirm this as reality and not some dreadful nightmare.

After a while, Jenna shut her eyes tightly and clenched her teeth as she entered the room that served as Julien's bedroom, living space, kitchen, and dining area.

Hunching down beside her brother, she let him cry, not daring to touch him in his state of shock. Softly, she spoke, "We don't have much debt left to settle. Even if we lose our current jobs, we can find new ones. There's no rush...

"You have a solid foundation. There must be other masters out there who would gladly take you in...

"Mom wanted us to have a better life, not to wallow in self-blame..."

Jenna repeated these words again and again until Julien, his spirit shattered, exhausted himself. His body gradually weakened, and he slumped against the wall by the window, drifting off to sleep.

Finally, silence fell.

Watching her brother's face slowly relax, his fear and anguish ebbing away, Jenna let out a silent sigh. Tears welled up in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks.

After shedding silent tears for some time, she rose to her feet and made her way to Julien's bed. Tenderly, she gathered the blanket and draped it over her sleeping brother, leaning against the wall.

Having done all this, she trudged wearily back to the other room. It was her and her mother Elodie's bedroom.

Jenna lay down, her vacant eyes fixed on the dimly lit ceiling, cast in moonlight.

Her mother's words echoed incessantly in her mind, but she couldn't convince herself.

Perhaps, aside from a fortunate few, darkness was the dominant theme in life. Light was but an occasional adornment.

Abruptly, Jenna seized her mother's pillow and pressed it against her face, her body trembling with suppressed sobs.

Why, why is darkness always so overpowering, devoid of light?

When will the sun rise again?

At some point, Jenna succumbed to a deep slumber.

She was startled awake by the commotion outside.

Sitting up, she rubbed her swollen eyes and hastened out of the room.

The sight that greeted her eyes was Julien, toasting slices of bread.
He no longer bore the devastation of the previous night; instead, he was focused on his task.
Jenna's lips quivered for a moment before she finally spoke her customary greeting.
"Why are you up so early?"
Julien responded with a touch of stiffness, "I didn't have dinner yesterday, and my hunger woke me up.
"Just wait a little longer. The toast will be ready soon."
Observing her brother's state, Jenna couldn't ease her worry.
If Julien were still in the midst of a mental breakdown, weeping as he did the night before, she might feel uncomfortable, gloomy, and desperate, but she wouldn't be afraid.
She would compel her brother to meet Franca and have her find a genuine psychiatrist for his treatment.
Yet now, she couldn't be certain if Julien had genuinely recovered or if he was merely presenting a facade of normalcy.
If there were unresolved issues lurking beneath, they could prove catastrophic when they resurfaced!
Jenna feared her brother might leap from a building and end his own life just after they finished breakfast.
Carefully observing Julien for a while, she sensed that his hysterical breakdown had indeed dissipated, but his mind hadn't fully returned to its usual state.
When Julien prepared breakfast, he moved with agility and skill. No issues there. However, during their conversations, he appeared wooden, rigid, and slow to react.
This convinced Jenna that her brother had repressed not only his breakdown and abnormalities but also his thoughts and soul.
Sigh... I still have to find a real Psychiatrist... Jenna's vision blurred once more.
Before long, Julien finished toasting the bread and went to a nearby vendor to purchase a relatively fresh can of milk.
As Jenna nibbled on her breakfast, she pretended indifference and glanced at her brother.
"I couldn't sleep last night, and I felt despondent. I want to see a psychiatrist. You don't seem any better. Would you like to come with me?"
After a brief pause, Julien replied, "I need to job hunt."
A wave of sorrow washed over Jenna once more.
Her brother didn't question her pursuit of a psychiatrist.
People in this neighborhood were reluctant to visit even a regular doctor, let alone a psychiatrist, for mental concerns.
Most of them were unaware of the profession of "psychiatrist" and

didn't believe they had any psychological issues.
Considering that seeing a genuine Psychiatrist might require an appointment, Jenna didn't press the matter. After some contemplation, she spoke encouragingly, "I think you should choose your employer and master carefully this time. It's normal not to find a job within a few days. It might take a week, or two, or even a month.
"When the time comes, both of us will have an income. Maybe we can settle the remaining debt within a year. I certainly can't do it alone. The income of an underground singer isn't stable. I never know when my popularity might wane."
On the one hand, Jenna aimed to alleviate the pressure on her brother in advance, so he wouldn't break down again due to the inability to find a job quickly. On the other hand, she emphasized his importance, assuring him that she couldn't do it alone. By relying on his responsibility, she sought to fortify his will to survive and prevent any sudden thoughts of suicide.
Jenna, who had never considered such details the previous day, couldn't help but ponder similar matters today.
Having repeatedly steadied Julien's condition, she watched her brother depart for the gathering spot at Quartier du Jardin Botanique, where factories sought employees and gave opportunities.
After taking a brief rest, Jenna left 17 Rue Pasteur, still feeling somewhat weary, and made her way towards Rue Saint-Hilaire, which was within close proximity.
Her plan was to stroll leisurely towards Rue des Blouses Blanches. It would coincide with Franca waking up, enabling her to persuade Franca to arrange an appointment with a genuine Psychiatrist.
Lost in her thoughts as she passed the intersection, Jenna's gaze swept across the vacant space, catching sight of a newspaper article displayed on a nearby newsstand: "Member of Parliament Hugues Artois Stresses Impartial Handling of Goodville Chemical Factory Explosion."
Intrigued, Jenna was drawn to the words, instinctively stepping closer and picking up the newspaper to swiftly peruse the news.
"...Newly elected member of parliament, Hugues Artois, believes it is unjust to vilify factory owners solely based on accidents. Nor should factory owners, who generate numerous jobs and contribute taxes to the country, face bankruptcy after enduring a mishap. Such circumstances would result in a surge of bankruptcies, heightened unemployment rates, and a fresh wave of protests and turmoil.
"Hugues Artois has expressed his commitment to not forget the

injured and deceased in the explosion. He intends to establish a new public welfare fund to assist factory owners in covering a portion of accident compensation, enabling the factories to continue operating. Those responsible for the accident will bear the weight of their sins through increased job creation and tax contributions.
"He further stated his intent to propose a bill at the National Convention, fostering a more favorable environment for entrepreneurs. This would involve streamlined dismissal of unqualified workers and employees, as well as fairer compensation for accidents..."
At that moment, Jenna's shoulders quivered unexpectedly.
She laughed, her body trembling for an extended period.
After a while, she set the newspaper down and resumed her onward journey.
Unbeknownst to her, Jenna arrived at Rue Saint-Hilaire and the partially destroyed Goodville Chemical Factory.
As she gazed at the battered metal tank, thoughts of her mother, Elodie, flooded her mind once again.
She would always gravitate towards that iconic structure upon entering the factory.
A few minutes later, through her blurred vision, Jenna spotted an unfamiliar yet vaguely familiar face.
It was a woman donned in a worn-out dress who said to Jenna, "Hurry, let's make our way to Avenue du Marché. The member of parliament is hosting a condolence banquet and extending invitations. We might be able to obtain something!"
"A condolence banquet?" Jenna asked, bewildered.
The woman nodded enthusiastically.
"Yes, indeed! Your mother was injured in the explosion too, don't you remember? We met in the ward.
"That member of parliament arrived at the hospital just half an hour ago. There will be a condolence banquet later!"
"Hugues Artois?" Jenna blurted out instinctively.
"Exactly, exactly. That's the name," the woman affirmed, grasping the dazed Jenna's arm and hastening towards the member of parliament's office on Avenue du Marché.
Half an hour later, they reached the khaki-colored four-story building.
Many individuals dressed like paupers were queued up for inspection, awaiting entry into the hall.
Jenna, wearing a simple grayish-blue dress, let her hair fall naturally over her shoulders without any makeup.
She joined the back of the line and gradually made her way

forward.
Nearly fifteen minutes later, it was finally her turn.
A woman in a dark-blue uniform began the inspection, starting with Jenna's head and proceeding to her boots.
After confirming the absence of any dangerous items, the woman directed her to register and verify her identity before entering the banquet hall.
...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Lumian cast a surprised glance at Franca, who had appeared at the door, and exclaimed, "You're early again today."
Franca, still donning a blouse, light-colored breeches, and red boots, was now clad in a different ensemble.
She scoffed and retorted, "I'm merely concerned that you and Jenna might outwardly agree, only to carry out an assassination on the Member of Parliament's secretary, Rhône."
"Am I seen as such a reckless individual in your eyes?" Lumian inquired.
"Yes," Franca responded without hesitation.
She even contemplated adding the word "most," but when she recollected a Folk of Rage she had encountered in a seaside town, she felt that Lumian couldn't be categorized as one.
Breathing a sigh of relief, she continued, "Since you haven't acted impulsively, Jenna should be safe. I'll go and visit her, assessing if she requires any assistance at home."
Just as Franca concluded her statement, hurried footsteps resounded from downstairs, drawing nearer.
Lumian and Franca, positioned by the doorway, turned their heads to behold Jenna, garbed in a simple grayish-blue dress, her hair tousled, rushing over in distress. She sobbed and uttered, "My brother, my brother has gone insane! He's become a lunatic..."

Chapter 251: Giant Tree

Jenna's brother gone mad? Lumian's rage surged.

Not because he was angry with the other party and thought his mental strength too weak to crumble so easily into madness, but because he heard fate's mocking laughter once again.

He noticed yesterday that Julien blamed himself for Elodie's death and showed signs of withdrawing into himself, but that was far from madness. Even if he faced psychological issues in the future, they would be prolonged, not an instant breakdown.

Unless... unless something happened last night that dealt Julien another heavy blow!

Damn fate!

Franca shared the surprise.

Yesterday, she had warned Jenna to keep an eye on her brother's mental state, but she hadn't expected Julien to lose his mind so swiftly.

As far as she knew, he was a resilient young man. He was in good health, and his emotions wouldn't easily be affected or trigger dangerous tendencies. It would be normal for him to isolate himself or indulge for a while, but a complete breakdown in one night seemed unlikely.

Jenna had mentioned Julien's inclination towards extremism, but that was for the sake of their family. With his sister still alive, burdened with debts, and the need to become an underground singer, it was evident that Julien would persist and work hard to share the load until the debts were repaid. If his psychological issues persisted until then, he might collapse or quietly take his own life.

This led Franca to suspect that Julien had been agitated once again the previous night.

She had similar concerns about Jenna's mother's decision to commit suicide, but she refrained from mentioning it to avoid upsetting Jenna.

Franca understood Elodie's feelings and choices, but suicide felt too hasty and impulsive, as if something had influenced her emotions.

Before transmigrating into this world, Franca had read many reports of such nature. She knew that the torment of poverty, self-blame for burdening the family with debts, fear of being incapable of labor, and pure selfless love could drive an optimistic person into a desperate situation, leading them to sacrifice themselves.

However, such matters typically involved a period of internal struggle before they were carried out. After all, everyone had a will

to survive and would consider their loved ones' feelings. While it wasn't impossible to commit suicide upon understanding the circumstances, the chances were quite low.
Franca speculated two possibilities. First, Jenna's mother might have been psychologically affected by her physical condition. Second, the explosion at the chemical plant might have been part of the motives of the Member of Parliament secretary, Rhône, and others. The subsequent abnormal and widespread emotional fluctuations could be connected to those events.
Is Julien in a similar situation? Franca shifted her gaze to Jenna, who approached Room 207, sobbing.
"What happened?"
"Julien got fired," Jenna said, her expression filled with resentment. "Just because he didn't go to the factory yesterday afternoon. But who thinks of work when their mother has just passed away? After leaving the hospital, he immediately went to his master to request time off, but they handed him a dismissal notice instead. He had been an apprentice there for a whole year!"
"Dammit!" Franca cursed. "Can't they just deduct some money? Are they heartless? Do none of their own family members die?"
"They said it needed to be requested in advance. It can't be done afterward." Jenna wiped her tears. "Julien broke down this morning. He cried like a child, blaming himself and expressing his fear of losing his job. I waited until he was exhausted from crying and fell asleep before rushing over to find you. I went to Rue des Blouses Blanches first but found no one there, so I came here."
As she spoke, her words meandered, as though a flood of emotions had surged within her and needed release.
Franca let out a relieved sigh.
"It doesn't seem too grave. Sounds more like an overwhelming breakdown. Trust me, a genuine Psychiatrist can heal your brother completely. I'll arrange an appointment for you right away!"
As Franca spoke, she turned and headed towards the staircase.
The anger in Lumian's heart intensified.
Forgetting to request time off, getting fired on the very day he made the request, succumbing to new disturbances, and spiraling into madness—it all seemed too coincidental.
Motherf*cker Termiboros!
Motherf*cker Inevitability!
Lumian spun towards Jenna and said sharply, "Let's pay a visit to the factory owner and your brother's master!"
Jenna pursed her lips and replied simply, "Okay."
Lumian walked past her and followed Franca up the stairs, his fiery blue eyes burning with determination.

At that moment, the words of Psychiatrist Madam Susie echoed in his mind: Always remind yourself not to overreact. Whenever you feel a similar surge of emotions, take deep breaths and find your calm...
Lumian took a deep breath, feeling a sense of alarm.
In the face of Jenna's brother's madness and fate's cruel taunts, he should be angered and protest, but he shouldn't have allowed his rage to consume him completely!
Almost simultaneously, behind Lumian, Jenna's resentful expression transformed into a calm one. From somewhere, she drew a brownish-green dagger,
resembling a blade fashioned from tree branches instead of metal. Its surface was adorned with bark, arranged in intricate patterns.
With a swift motion, Jenna thrust the dagger towards Lumian's back.
Reacting swiftly, Lumian twisted his body, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow. The dagger found purchase between his shoulder and back, drawing blood.
Jenna leaped back with agility, while the crimson blood from Lumian's wound flowed profusely, like crimson fire.
The bark on Jenna's brownish-green dagger seemed to come alive, greedily absorbing Lumian's blood.
In that moment, the muscles on Jenna's face contorted, rendering her unrecognizable to Lumian and Franca.
In an instant, she transformed into an enchanting and ethereal girl, her features captivating.
Lumian's pupils dilated as he recognized the imposter.
Charlotte Calvino!
Charlotte Calvino, the leading actress of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons!
Charlotte blended seamlessly with her surroundings, evading Lumian's fiery crimson fireball with ease.
Amidst the thunderous explosion, the door to Room 207 crumbled.
The actress chuckled and uttered,
"You regained your senses swiftly. I couldn't eliminate you directly.
"But it matters not. We only require a small portion of your blood."
...
On Avenue du Marché, outside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the member of parliament's office,
Jenna stepped into the banquet hall with bewilderment. Before her eyes lay an array of exquisite desserts, savory dishes, and glasses of vibrant-colored drinks, spread across long tables.
In one corner of the hall, a small symphony band played a soothing melody, accompanied by the sparkling brilliance of a

crystal chandelier and the gentle rays of sunlight pouring in through the windows.
Amongst the crowd were individuals clad in brown jackets, linen shirts, and nondescript attire from the market district, appearing rather out of place amidst the opulence of the banquet.
Some stood in a corner, their expressions vacant, while others regarded the luxurious items with resentment. Some consumed food in a state of confusion, while others savored champagne with excitement, relishing the taste of an affair reserved for the upper class.
Instinctively, Jenna retreated to a dimly lit corner, her expression impassive as she silently observed everything around her.
Meanwhile, on the fourth floor of the member of parliament's office.
Hugues Artois, dressed in a black tailcoat and a dark-blue bow tie, his sideburns mottled and his nose prominent, stood behind a window, surveying the market district.
This chaotic and antiquated place belonged to his kingdom.
"Monsieur Member of Parliament, why host a condolence banquet and invite these plebeians?" Rhône, wearing gold-rimmed glasses and sporting neatly combed hair, asked in confusion.
Hugues Artois smiled.
"It is the duty of a member of parliament. Before assuming another identity, I must fulfill my obligations.
"Furthermore, by offering condolences and assistance to the grieving people at this time, I will leave a lasting impression in their minds. They may become my loyal followers in the future. When the time comes, their conversion will be easier."
The red-haired Cassandra chuckled.
"And they shall remain oblivious to the fact that it is you, a member of parliament, who has brought calamity, pain, and despair upon them.
"They will only perceive the care and concern from a high-ranking figure, satisfied by your promises."
Secretary Rhône nodded, a smile playing on his lips.
"In their eyes, Monsieur Member of Parliament is an esteemed figure they can only admire from afar. They dare not approach or question him, let alone harbor suspicions, vent their anger, or harbor hatred.
"As long as there is no organization among them, they will never dare to resist."
Hugues Artois laughed and declared, "That is precisely why we must sow division among them, fueling their animosity towards each other."

With those words spoken, Hugues Artois turned his gaze towards the sunlit window and muttered to himself, "Those under the Mother Tree of Desire must have already commenced their actions, I presume..."

...

On Rue Anarchie, just outside Auberge du Coq Doré.

Without warning, the ground split open and the center caved in, catching several vendors off guard. They tumbled into the abyss, their screams abruptly silenced.

A colossal brownish-green tree sprang forth from the depths, its branches spreading in every direction.

Stretching across multiple blocks, it ensnared Auberge du Coq Doré within its leafy embrace.

The eloping couple, amidst their verbal sparring, found themselves once again engaged in their favored pastime. Anthony Reid, the information broker, sought refuge beneath a rickety wooden table, trembling uncontrollably. Meanwhile, Pavard Neeson, the proprietor of the underground bar, reached for his sketchpad, downing a gulp of liquor as he sketched with an expression of deep concern...

The immense brownish-green tree continued to grow, unabated.

Chapter 252: Ancient Times

Lumian's fireball missed its target, Charlotte, and in response, countless branches and vines slithered into Auberge du Coq Doré from every direction, entwining the walls, floor, windows, and ceiling. They twisted together in a tangle of brown and green, creating an impenetrable barrier.

In an instant, the entire scene transformed into a surreal illusion before solidifying once more.

Before him stood an immense tree, its shades of brown and green blending together harmoniously. Its roots delved deep into the earth, while its majestic crown reached ever higher towards the heavens.

Lumian's eyes widened as he realized he had been unknowingly transported. It was reminiscent of his previous journeys into Paramita, where he would find himself in a new place without any awareness of the transition.

Gone was Auberge du Coq Doré. Now, his feet trod upon the tangled knots of tree roots that carpeted the ground. His gaze ascended to the colossal tree, reminiscent of ancient legends, as the vast expanse of the sky with its painted-like blue hue and fluffy white clouds loomed above.

The tree's surface was marred by repulsive, damp growths, and each branch appeared to bear the weight of a structure—a building, a road, and other peculiarities.

Auberge du Coq Doré was among them, perched upon a brownish-green tree trunk, intertwined with countless branches and vines, revealing a mere dozen windows to the world.

Through one of the glass windows, Lumian caught sight of the eloping couple engaged in passionate love-making, while the information broker, Anthony Reid, cowered under a wooden table, trembling in fear...

The other tree trunks held objects enshrouded by branches, leaves, and vines, appearing ethereal and hazy, as if they were scenes recorded by a magnetic field through foggy air.

Within this realm, ancient buildings with pediments, herringbone roofs, and lead-framed windows emerged. Women clutching gas street lamps were embraced from behind, priests stood before nude men, and individuals leaped out of glass windows while covering their behinds. Exquisite bodies were carried on trays to dining tables, orgies unfolded with clothing strewn about, and an evil beauty turned her head to reveal two black goat horns. A bishop naked from the bottom half heard confessions from believers in front of a Sacred Emblem.

The scenes varied in architectural styles, clothing, and hairstyles, some evoking ancient times while others seemed to have occurred just yesterday.
Behind Lumian, crimson Fire Ravens materialized, half-illusory. He swiftly scanned the area, yet Franca was nowhere to be found.
Franca hadn't been transported to this place caught between reality and illusion!
On Rue Anarchie, amidst the tree roots, branches, and vines, street vendors and pedestrians devoured the food they sold. Even after vomiting, they continued to eat with unwavering determination. Some forcefully pinned down members of the opposite sex on the street, others drawing daggers to attack peers who had provoked them or dared steal their spots. In scenes of utter chaos, certain individuals approached glass windows, attempting to entice their reflections into a dance with a gentlemanly bow.
Pedestrians and carriages traversed the streets, seemingly oblivious to the extraordinary circumstances. Vendors continued their lively hawking, and shops remained open. Passersby appeared captivated by the bustling atmosphere, unwilling to depart.
What they failed to notice was the absence of anyone who had entered this area—they had simply vanished, never to return.
...
On the fourth floor of the khaki-colored building that housed the member of parliament's office at Avenue du Marché.
Hugues Artois, lost in thought, gazed out at the nearby streets.
Cassandra, with her fiery red hair, turned back to him and asked with curiosity, "What is Susanna from the Bliss Society planning?"
A smile formed on Hugues Artois' lips as he replied, "They spoke a great deal, but my understanding was limited. I recall them mentioning a plan to submerge the underground divine tree into the depths of Fourth Epoch Trier and extend it into a place called the astral world."
Cassandra, Rhône, Margaret, and Boduva exchanged puzzled and concerned glances, unable to hide their confusion.
"But won't that cause a tremendous uproar? Our current strength is far from that of official Beyonders. It's best to avoid a direct clash with them. You might not be aware, but I come from the Sauron family, and I understand the authorities quite well. I know how powerful and formidable they can be.
"Everything we've done so far has been in secret, evading investigations as best we could. If we were to be exposed, it's highly likely that we would face a Saint or a Grade 1 Sealed Artifact. And beyond them, there are angels and Grade 0 Sealed

Artifacts."
Hugues Artois pressed his right hand down and reassured them with a smile.
"Fear not, they won't implicate us.
"I didn't incite them to undertake this endeavor. I didn't even offer a hint or assistance. I can only be considered aware of their plan in advance, silently consenting to their actions.
"The only thing that could potentially link us to this affair is the explosion at the chemical plant that received an excessive amount of decay blessings. However, that occurred because Bono Goodville misunderstood Rhône's intentions and committed an unforgivable crime. The various emotions and desires stemming from the accident were exploited, amplified, and used as nourishment. What does that have to do with us?"
As the team members' expressions eased, Hugues Artois stepped away from the window, emitting a deep chuckle.
"If they succeed, it will mark another solid step forward in our pursuits. We will be even closer to welcoming the descent of great existences. If they, unfortunately, fail, we will exercise restraint for the time being and strive to ensure that our activities remain hidden from the Beyonders of the two Churches. We will continue to be the rulers of the market district.
"Success or failure, it's our opportunity.
"During the National Convention's discussions, I will expose the corruption and mediocre abilities of the Beyonders from the two Churches. They have allowed heretics to repeatedly ravage the market district, each time worse than the last!
"I will request Bureau 8 to establish a branch in the market district to assist the inept Church Beyonders and share their burden.
"Bureau 8, always eager to expand its authority, will surely support my proposal.
"With three different official forces simultaneously present in the market district, conflicts among them will work to our advantage.
"Compared to the orthodox Beyonders of the two Churches, Bureau 8 can be influenced, corrupted, and gradually swayed to our side.
"This is my plan. In the long run, victory will be ours!"
Rhône, the secretary with gold-rimmed glasses and neatly combed hair, chuckled.
"That's my specialty."
Influencing, corrupting, and gradually decaying an organization, leading to its decline and moral degradation.
Hugues Artois adjusted his tailcoat and bow tie, preparing to leave for the banquet hall.
Before departing, he surveyed his surroundings, his gaze shifting

between Cassandra, Rhône, Boduva, and Margaret. An unusual sense of confidence and certainty washed over him.
These four subordinates possessed impressive Beyonder powers, with the red-haired Cassandra being particularly formidable, instilling him with a sense of security.
Outside the office door, near the stairs, stood an official Beyonder team tasked with protecting him.
Not every member of parliament received the privilege of a three-man protective team. Some were already powerful Beyonders, while others hailed from noble backgrounds and had their own Beyonder bodyguards. For some, a certain level of personal strength warranted the presence of a Beyonder companion to ensure their safety. It was only someone like Hugues Artois, lacking Beyonder abilities and familial support, who required such protection.
According to the rules, the responsibility of safeguarding Hugues Artois rotated among the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, the God of Steam and Machinery Church, and Bureau 8. Today, it was the turn of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.
In addition to the Beyonders, the entire building housed ten well-trained professional security guards armed with firearms. They were members of Bureau 7, a branch of the Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee—the Special Services Bureau—responsible for providing basic protection to members of parliament and high-ranking government officials.
Standing by the door, Hugues Artois awaited Rhône, his secretary, to open it. With a smile on his face, he lifted his head slightly, puffed out his chest, and confidently walked out, descending the stairs.
...
On the ground covered with tangled tree roots,
Lumian surrounded himself with semi-illusory Fire Ravens, once again spotting Charlotte Calvino, the leading lady of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
With a remarkable talent for acting, Charlotte gracefully wandered through the illusory scenes formed by the various tree trunks. Sometimes, she adorned a corset dress and styled her hair in an elegant bun. Other times, she embraced contemporary fashion, donning a fitted dress, a small coat, and long boots. On certain occasions, she even transported herself to the era of the Sauron royal family, embodying their love for masculine attire and blending seamlessly with the corresponding backdrop.
In this ethereal process, whenever she left one misty illusory scene, she promptly emerged in another, as if leisurely strolling

through different eras of Trier.
Beneath the dim glow of the gas street lamps, Charlotte wore a smile as she addressed Lumian, "You should consider yourself honored. You are the first dissident to enter the divine tree and merge with it."
The crimson Fire Ravens encircling Lumian condensed but refrained from attacking. This was because Charlotte constantly flickered between illusory scenes, altering her appearance with each transition.
Her voice echoed from all directions, forming sentences.
Lumian had already donned black gloves. His right hand was in his pocket, gripping Mr. K's finger tightly.
Charlotte continued her discourse, introducing the situation as if through an aria, as if it were insufficient to satisfy her inner desires.
This ancient Tree of Shadow predates the construction of present-day Trier. Its roots were buried deep underground.
"It brings delight and sustenance to the people of Trier. With the aid of the devil lineage and devoted followers, the ambiance here gradually transformed according to the deity's desired path. The people of Trier have never failed it. Both debauchery and pleasure are inherent to human nature. Year after year, they showered it with various excessive desires, providing it with nourishment.
"Over a millennium has elapsed. Although Trier hasn't reached the expected pinnacle of unbridled joy and indulgence until death, it has taken form. The divine tree's growth has now reached a crucial crossroads.
"In such a situation, pure desires and emotions can no longer play their primary role. They can only serve as firewood for the fire. We require a sacrifice of considerable magnitude. And you, who possess corruption at the angelic level but lack commensurate strength, are the perfect choice!"
Lumian's heart skipped a beat upon hearing this. His pupils dilated, as if he wished to see Charlotte's face clearly.
Does she know that I carry the sealed power of Inevitability within me?
Charlotte grinned.
"The first time you summoned High Priestess Susanna, she sensed the terrifying angelic power sealed within you. She didn't dare possess you. Her subsequent attempts to kill you were not solely motivated by Charlie!"

Chapter 253: Root of the Problem

Upon hearing Charlotte's words, Lumian grasped the problem in an instant.

As soon as he reached the market district and attempted his first Summoning Dance, he unintentionally summoned Susanna Mattise, who had been drawn to Charlie, into his room.

At the time, Susanna seemed eager to possess him, but she instinctively sensed the danger lurking within the seal and refrained from acting. This mirrored the behavior of the peculiar creatures Lumian had summoned before. It appeared that only by compelling them would they dare to take hold of him.

Hence, Lumian didn't see anything amiss then. Even when he later encountered Susanna Mattise again and gained deeper insight into the Bliss Society, he failed to connect the dots.

But now, he realized his oversight.

Susanna Mattise was fundamentally different from the strange creatures he had previously summoned!

The dissimilarity didn't lie in her status as a Sequence 5 evil spirit who had failed to attain godhood, but rather in her possession of reason and the ability to think. Besides being extremely fanatical and persistent, she could also lead and develop a secret organization!

When such an evil spirit sensed the tremendously dangerous power sealed within Lumian's body, even if she didn't immediately recognize it as angelic-level corruption, she would have left in confusion and sought revelation from the evil god she believed in!

By the time she grasped the situation, Lumian, possessing the strength of a Low-Sequence Beyonder equivalent to an angel, would be irresistibly appealing to heretics skilled in sacrificial rituals. He would be no less enticing than a hundred million verl d'or abandoned on the street before a Scrooge.

Had it not been for Lumian's quick thinking, temporarily stunning her with Fallen Mercury and deceiving Susanna Mattise during their second encounter, the situation might have reached its conclusion before the official Beyonders arrived.

For Charlie, an ordinary person, to successfully descend from the fifth floor to Lumian's door and seek help despite Susanna Mattise's threats and lingering presence, it seemed more than just mere luck.

One couldn't trust the words and emotions of an Actor, especially those who were particularly good-looking!

In Charlotte Calvino's performance, Lumian had been scanning the surroundings, hoping to utilize a Hunter's instincts to find an exit

from this peculiar space.
Yet, aside from the entangled tree roots blanketing the ground, the colossal slowly-growing brownish-green tree, and the oil painting-like blue sky with white clouds, there was nothing else.
In such an environment, Lumian's Pyromaniac instincts made him stop hesitating. He released his grip on Mr. K's finger and flung it into the air.
Almost simultaneously, the semi-illusory crimson Fire Ravens condensed around him took flight, each tracing an elegant arc as they soared toward the illusionary scene where Charlotte Calvino stood and the fog of the past lingering on the surrounding branches.
Charlotte stepped out of the grand palace, suspected to be a scene depicting Emperor Roselle's affair, and entered the White Maple Palace during the Sauron royal era. There, a Beyonder who had transformed into a man due to a potion but hadn't changed his sexual orientation was scrutinizing the noble ladies' spouses.
The rumbling sounds persisted, yet Charlotte effortlessly evaded the onslaught of Fire Ravens. The fog-shrouded scenes of the past remained unyielding, as if they were truly nonexistent. However, the brownish-green branches that bore them showed signs of scorching and charring.
The Tree of Shadow was, after all, a tree, and thus susceptible to combustion!
The only issue was that Lumian's Fire Ravens inflicted minimal harm upon it.
In an explosive moment, Mr. K's finger detonated like a bomb, transforming into a gruesome rain of flesh and blood that draped Lumian in a hooded robe of crimson.
To Lumian's dismay, Mr. K didn't appear immediately. It was uncertain whether it would take time to sense his presence or if the Tree of Shadow had isolated this space from the real world.
Charlotte ventured into the illusory scene of a torrential downpour, where a few naked figures sprinted about. Her white silk dress seemed drenched, adhering to her body and accentuating her unusually exquisite form.
She bestowed Lumian with a smile, her eyes akin to serene lakes tinged with timidity, innocence, and purity.
A searing flame coursed through Lumian's being, igniting from his head down to his very core.
Lumian's heart surged with longing. He darted between the entangled roots, heading toward the brownish-green tree and the captivating figure of Charlotte Calvino.
Charlotte didn't traverse the various illusory scenes. Instead, she

stepped onto a tree branch below and leaned against the brownish-green trunk. Her body trembled slightly, as if yearning to hide but finding no escape.
Lumian's eyes blazed with a reddened fury as his gaze fixated upon Charlotte's sparkling eyes, moist lips, graceful neck, and alluring curves. His thoughts became a chaotic haze.
Thus, he failed to notice Charlotte's abdomen and legs sinking into the brownish-green trunk. He failed to observe the crack forming, unveiling a colossal moist flower.
The vivid red flower bloomed gradually, akin to an enormous mouth anticipating its prey.
Lumian lunged toward Charlotte, propelled by his fervor.
Charlotte couldn't help but smile.
At that very moment, a muffled explosion erupted from Lumian's right pocket.
Boom!
Underneath his blood-colored robe, a ball of flames burst forth, ripping through his pocket and igniting his shirt, causing an agonizing pain to course through Lumian's waist.
Lumian's eyes regained some semblance of clarity. Swiftly, he reached out and grasped Charlotte's wrist, keeping a minimal distance between himself and the moist flower.
Having long been aware of the Mother Tree of Desire's ability to awaken various desires, how could Lumian not have been on guard against Charlotte's seduction?
However, in order to prevent the other party from detecting his defenses prematurely and setting a trap, he chose not to directly soak the Mysticism Smelling Salts in cloth and place it near his nose. Nor did he turn the dagger around, preparing for the collision that would bring him back to his senses. In their current predicament, such methods held little reliability, for Charlotte might not allow him to truly pounce on her.
Hence, Lumian opted to create a small fireball with a delayed explosion in his pocket, all the while gripping Mr. K's finger!
If he remained unaffected and the fireball neared detonation, he could choose to dispel it and create another.
The small fireball inflicted negligible harm upon him. Its primary purpose was to awaken him through pain.
As for the resultant burn injuries, Lumian paid them no heed.
Pyromaniacs held no fear of such trivialities!
In an instant, Lumian seized Charlotte's wrist, and he caught a flicker of fear on her face.
Without delay, two serpent-like crimson flames burst forth from Lumian's palm, searing their way along Charlotte's arm toward

her body and head.
Instinctively, Charlotte tilted her neck back, emitting a pained groan as her skin swiftly turned black from the scorching flames.
Just as Lumian was on the verge of engulfing her entirely, a wave of intense danger washed over him.
He attempted to pull Charlotte to the side, but she appeared to meld with the brownish-green tree. No matter how hard Lumian tugged, he couldn't extricate her.
Reluctantly, Lumian abandoned his futile efforts and lunged to his right.
With a muffled thud, a tree trunk as thick as a wine glass descended from the sky, impaling the ground teeming with tangled roots like a javelin, its tip quivering violently.
Lumian glanced upward and beheld Susanna Mattise, her turquoise hair cascading around her, her emerald eyes and scarlet lips.
She possessed a translucent quality, standing amidst the dense and ethereal canopy of the tree, blending seamlessly with it.
Both the brownish-green trunk and the outstretched branches bore colossal wet flowers in pale hues, flourishing and blooming.
...
On Avenue du Marché, inside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the parliament member's office.
In a corner, Jenna observed Hugues Artois, garbed in elegance, leading his secretary Rhône and others through the gathering. With a glass of champagne in hand, he offered consolation, made promises, and delivered impromptu speeches with mere words. In response, he received sincere gratitude, unveiled dependence, and instinctive flattery.
Jenna couldn't help but recall a question Lumian had once posed to her: "Do you wish to sit here and watch as the murderers responsible for your mother's death and the destruction of your happiness revel in champagne, indulge in dance parties, and inflict more heartbreak on innocent families?"
Unconsciously, Jenna's fists clenched, her knowledge of the truth fueling an uncontrollable anguish.
However, she understood the need to restrain herself. Acting impulsively wouldn't yield results. She had to endure.
This was because following the proper procedures, she couldn't take action against a parliament member without substantial evidence. And if she desired to seek justice independently, her adversaries boasted several Beyonders who had been bestowed with an evil god's boon and were protected by official Beyonders and armed personnel.

All she could do was endure and await the future!

...

Within the confines of Auberge du Coq Doré, ensnared by branches and vines, Franca stood near the staircase, her face flushed and her eyes glistening as she battled to suppress the overwhelming desire coursing through her veins.

Her right hand trembled as she retrieved the canister of Mysticism Smelling Salts obtained from Rentas. With a twist of the lid, she raised it to her nose.

Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!

A series of sneezes erupted, marking Franca's triumph over her desires and the gradual return of her rationality.

Swiftly scanning her surroundings, she realized that Lumian, who had been mere steps away, had vanished.

Taking note of the unnatural transformations plaguing the motel and the adjacent streets engulfed by colossal trees, Franca clenched her teeth and arrived at a resolution. The tree crowns above seemed to grow increasingly ethereal as they reached skyward, extending into an otherworldly realm.

She retrieved two objects from her possession.

They were a pair of tarot cards.

One depicted a man and a woman raising their cups in a greeting—the Two of Cups. In the center, a wooden staff coiled by twin serpents stood prominently.

The other card portrayed an angel sounding a trumpet, calling forth the resurrection of the departed—the Judgment card!

Chapter 254: The Weight of History

Franca clutched the Judgment card tightly and chanted in Hermes, "Rain judgment!"

The ordinary-looking tarot card remained unchanged, but within a few seconds, Auberge du Coq Doré trembled visibly.

The brownish-green branches and turquoise vines that covered the building's facade receded, as if filled with fear.

Franca's view through the window expanded. She witnessed the sky merging with the ethereal canopy of a colossal tree. The clouds appeared to be caught in a hurricane, swirling in unison.

As the wind shifted, numerous white clouds gathered, forming a massive vortex that descended to the ground, elongating into a sword-like gust that bridged heaven and earth.

The sword descended, and a figure stood unwavering in the middle of Rue Anarchie.

It was a woman with shoulder-length blond hair, donned in a traditional grayish-white knight's training attire.

Standing over 1.5 meters tall, her features were exquisite, and her eyes exuded a commanding aura of dignity, demanding submission and obedience.

Rue Anarchie, where she stood, was no longer recognizable. The surrounding buildings, the narrow roads, and the vendors and pedestrians, consumed by their own desires, were divided and scattered across the strange wilderness, blending with the other streets.

Interwoven roots sprouted from the ground, connecting the scattered sections. Radiating from the brownish-green tree at the center, they spread out layer by layer, growing denser as they neared the core.

The streets occupied by the colossal tree remained hidden from the outside world, thanks to this strange wilderness!

Franca let out a sigh of relief at the sight of the short yet dignified lady with blond hair.

Grasping the Judgment and Two of Cups cards, she blurted out, "Praise The Fool! Praise Madam Judgement!"

As soon as the woman known as Madam Judgment landed, her gaze fell upon the side of the brownish-green tree. Unbeknownst to Franca, a cradle-like dark-red open carriage had appeared there at some point. Two towering creatures with goat horns, pitch-black bodies, and burning dark flames pulled the carriage. They seemed to be Demons.

Seated within the carriage was a woman wearing a light-colored veil. She adorned a loose white robe, her slightly swollen belly

emanating a tangible maternal glow.
Lady Moon!
The strange wilderness was her Paramita world!
Lady Moon... You have emerged from the rat's hole... The eyes of Judgment, the blond-haired lady, instantly took on an ethereal quality, as if touched by a golden hue.
Through her eyes, she perceived the intertwining Beyonder powers that existed within the woman on the carriage, manifesting in different colors and states.
"Deprivation!" Madam Judgment's solemn voice resounded.
It was an ancient Hermes word.
With a simple gesture of her right hand, Madam Judgment temporarily stripped the ability to copulate between creatures of different genders.
Immediately after, Madam Judgment leaned forward, pushed out her palm, and declared in ancient Hermes, "Exile!"
With a whirring sound, an invisible and majestic force coalesced into a terrifying hurricane, howling before Lady Moon.
Unfazed by distance, it materialized directly where the carriage was.
Beneath Lady Moon's veil, her faintly discernible red lips parted as she took deep breaths.
The exaggerated hurricane, capable of toppling an entire building, seemed to find an outlet in a confined vessel. It surged into Lady Moon's mouth and permeated her body.
In just a second, the hurricane dissipated into nothingness, completely absorbed by Lady Moon.
With a radiant maternal glow, she extended her right hand, caressing her swollen stomach with tenderness.
...
The cerulean sky and billowing clouds resembled exquisite paintings, while the earth beneath was a realm entwined with tree roots.
Lumian's gaze met Susanna Mattise perched atop the crown of the tree, and they exchanged a knowing look. In an instant, semi-ethereal crimson Fire Ravens materialized around him.
The Fire Ravens circled and soared towards the heavens, but they couldn't breach the ethereal canopy of the tree. They could only approach, their presence without touch.
They alighted upon the brownish-green trunk, scorching it with blackened marks.
Observing this, Lumian swiftly shifted his focus.
He had discovered earlier that flames possessed the ability to inflict certain damage upon the enigmatic entity known as the

Tree of Shadow!
Crimson fireballs condensed one after another, hurtling towards the branches of the tree. Yet, they merely singed them without evident impact.
Lumian paused momentarily. Susanna Mattise was preoccupied with something, and Charlotte Calvino had yet to recover from her burns. It was suspected that she had taken refuge within an illusory scene, allowing the crimson flames in his palm to accumulate layer by layer until they transformed into a fist-sized sphere of searing incandescence.
Boom!
The explosion caused by the incandescent fireball was several times more powerful than before, but not a single fragment of the Tree of Shadow's bark fell. Only a larger area of charred flesh and the faint whiff of a colossal light-colored blossom attested to the reality of the incandescent white flame stream.
Lumian's expression turned grave. After a moment of contemplation, a spear formed from blazing white flames materialized in his hand.
He hurled the spear towards the brownish-green tree, witnessing it puncture needle-sized holes in the charred bark before disintegrating into a cascade of flames that spread across various sections of the tree.
Witnessing this, Lumian's heart clenched as he recalled his sister Aurore's favored phrase for describing those who overestimate their abilities to the point of impracticality: "It's akin to an ant attempting to shake a towering oak."
Lumian's anxiety, impatience, and fear compelled him to unleash his fists.
His clenched fists were engulfed in crimson flames.
As he struck the brownish-green tree, a wisp of fire infiltrated its surface.
Fire Infusion!
Lumian sought to bypass the Tree of Shadow's resilient outer bark and directly harm its core.
Bam! Bam! Bam!
His flaming fists pummeled the trunk of the brownish-green tree, as if he aimed to inject every accumulated flame within his being into it.
Bam! Bam! Bam! After a flurry of frenzied attacks, he retracted his fists and took a step back.
Rumble!
A muffled explosion reverberated from within the tree trunk, causing the charred bark to finally crumble away, consumed by

flames.
In an instant, an ethereal mist enveloped the scene, as if a long-forgotten beautiful dream had been set ablaze by a match.
Lumian found himself momentarily lost in a haze, as if he had transformed into the protagonist of that dream—a man engaged in a passionate encounter with an enchanting woman wearing an exquisite dress, her hem teasingly lifted.
The unfamiliar sensation felt so vivid that Lumian believed himself to be living it firsthand.
Abruptly, a sharp pain shot through his ankle, snapping him out of the reverie. He discovered numerous branches and vines emerging from his surroundings, stealthily coiling around his feet, their thorns piercing through his blood-colored robe, sinking into his flesh, and greedily drinking his blood.
Lumian grunted, crimson wisps emanating from his body, manifesting into a vibrant cloak of fiery flames that swathed his robe of flesh and blood.
Amidst crackling sounds, the branches and vines ignited, quickly withering into brittle twigs and ashen remnants.
Seizing the opportunity, Lumian swiftly retreated, his gaze fixed upon the wound he had inflicted.
His eyes met the same brownish-green bark, albeit slightly recessed compared to its surroundings.
Beneath the bark... more bark!
Lumian's pupils dilated as he gleaned the gravity of the situation.
The Tree of Shadow had been nurtured by the abnormal desires of Trier's denizens for one to two millennia. Each piece of bark likely represented specific human activities from a particular era, layered upon one another, carrying the weight of history and the subtleties of humanity.
In simple terms, Lumian realized that if he wished to destroy the Tree of Shadow, he would have to confront countless desires accumulated over the span of two thousand years. And he had exhausted his strength to vanquish merely one desire, perhaps one in a billion, or even billions upon billions.
How could he possibly prevail?
Only then did Lumian comprehend the abnormality of his actions.
He had been focused on assaulting the Tree of Shadow instead of seeking an escape route.
An exchange of glances with Susanna Mattise brought forth fear, anxiety, and a deluge of emotions.
No wonder Susanna Mattise allowed me to act freely. No wonder the injured Charlotte Calvino didn't intervene... Lumian had been cautious of the Fallen Tree Spirits and Actors that could evoke

desires and emotions, yet he had unknowingly fallen under their sway.
Once more, he raised his gaze and beheld Susanna Mattise, her hair a cascade of turquoise, nimbly shifting positions within the ethereal canopy, uttering an arcane incantation. Charlotte Calvino resumed her enigmatic actions, traversing illusory scenes, her attire, hairstyle, and makeup transforming to mirror various eras. It was no mere performance.
As Lumian's thoughts raced, dizziness assailed him, and his strength rapidly waned.
Such a sensation was foreign to him, but he had subjected others to its effects.
The sedative concocted by the Bliss Society!
Ever the keen observer of his surroundings, Lumian swiftly took out the Mysticism Smelling Salts, his attention drawn to the multitude of pallid flowers adorning the brownish-green tree.
He suspected they were responsible for releasing the sedative gas!
Achoo!
In the midst of his sneeze, Lumian pivoted, intending to distance himself from the Tree of Shadow.
Yet, Mr. K remained absent.
In the blink of an eye, roots emerged from the earth, intertwining to erect a formidable wooden barricade, surpassing ten meters in height, encircling the brownish-green tree and obstructing Lumian's path to freedom.
Lumian halted and pivoted on his heel. Countless fractures marred the trunk, branches, and roots of the Tree of Shadow. Some crevices harbored moist, light-colored flowers, while others resembled cavernous mouths oozing with viscous slime, swiftly elongating toward him.
Trapped with no means of escape, Lumian's lips curled into a smirk.
Without warning, he extended his right hand, pressing it firmly against his left chest. He spoke with a derisive tone, "Termiboros, they truly underestimate your worth. They actually intend to employ you as a sacrifice."

Chapter 255: Bridge of Communication

Upon learning of the Bliss Society's plan, Lumian's immediate assumption was that Susanna had made a crucial mistake.

What lay sealed within him wasn't just corruption at an angelic level, but an actual angel!

The former lacked self-awareness and reacted on instinct alone. Without undoing the seal and reconnecting it with its true form, it was like a cache of explosives temporarily without a detonator. While there was still a possibility of explosion, Susanna and the other heretics believed they could manage the situation.

By employing the right method, utilizing the isolated environment within the Tree of Shadow, arranging the necessary rituals, and harnessing the evil god's gaze during the sacrificial ceremony, they could break the seal and offer it as a sacrifice to the Mother Tree of Desire, ensuring the angelic corruption wouldn't pose a threat.

However, the true angel possessed intelligence and a strong will. He wouldn't idly stand by while being sacrificed.

Once the seal was completely lifted, could Susanna, Charlotte, and the others truly handle a genuine angel?

One of them was a Sequence 5 evil spirit that required the Tree of Shadow to possess some godhood, while the other was undoubtedly an Actor with an irrepressible desire to perform. As for a true angel, He had to be at least a Sequence 2 for Lumian to address Him as such. In ancient times, They were nearly on par with deities and were considered subsidiary gods. The difference between them was as vast as that between a saint and an ordinary individual.

Initially, Lumian hesitated to use Termiboros as an escape plan, fearing that the sinister and detestable angel would exploit the opportunity to make him do something seemingly innocent on the surface but secretly aid Him in infiltrating more of His powers beyond the seal.

In that scenario, Lumian, Susanna, and Charlotte would meet their doom. The Tree of Shadow would be destroyed or vanish underground, allowing Termiboros to truly descend upon the world.

Left with no other choice, Lumian cautiously stepped onto the steel rope suspended above a metaphorical abyss, hoping to maintain his balance.

One misstep, and he would fall into irreparable oblivion.

As soon as Lumian finished speaking, Termiboros's deep and commanding voice resounded in his ears.

It had been a while since Lumian had heard and resisted the

angel's temptation. He could only sense His connection to his own fate through the abnormal occurrences around him or the predetermined events. Yet, the angel hadn't given up and continued to make attempts.
Now, after many days, Lumian once again heard Termiboros's voice, experiencing the full presence of the angel sealed within him.
Termiboros's voice carried a tinge of relaxation and satisfaction as it echoed in Lumian's ears.
"If they underestimate me, it will only aid my escape from this seal.
"This environment is perfect, precisely what I've been waiting for. Even if you perish later and the seal loses its support, the outside world won't detect the corresponding changes and won't be able to prevent me from breaking free of my restraints.
"They may not outright kill you, but once they attempt to shatter the seal and perform their sacrificial act, I will unleash their predetermined fate. I will abandon your body and disrupt their ritual."
Termiboros's words insinuated:
This is the opportunity I've long awaited!
Why should I assist you? Just wait patiently for the inevitable outcome!
Lumian fell into silence and leaped away from his original position.
The tree roots split apart, and a massive, damp, pale flower blossomed, one after another, as if the abyss itself had yawned open.
Achoo!
Lumian inhaled the Mysticism Smelling Salts once more, dispelling his drowsiness.
He gazed up at Susanna Mattise in the sky and erupted into wild laughter.
"Haha, you're the most dim-witted bunch I've ever encountered!
"You've set up this ritual without a clue. Did your brains empty out because of your faith in the Mother Tree of Desire, or have they been filled with various liquids?
"Let me enlighten you. What's sealed inside me isn't corruption at the angelic level, but a bona fide angel. His name is Termiboros!
"As soon as that seal is undone, He shall descend upon us and slaughter you all. He'll shatter this foul, wretched fallen tree and cast it into a cesspool!
"If I were you, I'd cease this ritual now and let me go!"
Susanna Mattise, continually shifting positions within the illusory

tree canopy, looked down at Lumian and smiled.
"Are you bluffing again? Bluffing seems to be your favorite pastime. I fell for it once; I won't be fooled again."
Not far from her on a branch, one of the few windows on the surface of Auberge du Coq Doré, entwined with vines and branches, reflected the figure of the playwright Gabriel.
He frantically penned his name on a piece of paper with a fountain pen, as though a renowned author signing autographs for avid readers.
He had succumbed to the allure of his script, Lightseeker, gaining fame and becoming a household name.
Susanna Mattise continued, "Furthermore, we've contemplated the possibility that it's not corruption but an actual angel.
"Therefore, with the divine revelation, we've altered a crucial segment of the ritual. We will employ you as the primary sacrifice, together with the seal and the angel, to offer them to the mighty Mother Tree of Desire. It won't hinder the final outcome.
"Sacrificial rituals are not like cooking, where ingredients are transformed into dishes. Our task is to present the offerings to the deity. As for what befalls you, along with the seal and the angel within, it is for the great Mother Tree of Desire to decide.
"Why do you think I refrained from truly attacking you? Such an action might have prematurely shattered the seal!
"Don't even entertain the notion of threatening me with suicide. I shall imbue you with an ardent desire to live."
It seemed as though Termiboros was akin to a valuable gift that would break free of its own accord. The seal was like a locked box, and Lumian himself was the exquisite wrapping. Susanna and Charlotte had no intention of unwrapping the box and presenting the gift to the Mother Tree of Desire. Instead, their plan was to offer the box and its packaging to the deity, avoiding any significant risks.
Upon hearing Susanna Mattise's words, Lumian remained unfazed —neither surprised, nor fearful, nor disappointed.
He tilted his head slightly and directed his gaze towards his left chest, a smirk forming at the corners of his mouth.
"Termiboros, did you hear that? You're going to be packaged up and offered to the deity known as the Mother Tree of Desire. You won't get a chance to escape that seal.
"I'm not sure how the Mother Tree of Desire will deal with you, but I can assure you it won't be anything pleasant. Are you really content to wait for the final outcome as a mere bystander?"
This time, Termiboros didn't immediately respond to Lumian. After a few seconds, His resonant voice reverberated, "Draw your Fallen

Mercury and plunge it into the trunk of the Tree of Shadow. Pierce through its second layer of bark."
Lumian was taken aback.
"The fate of the Tree of Shadow can also be exchanged?"
Termiboros's voice regained its grandeur.
"It wasn't possible before, but now it is. That tree possesses a certain living characteristic. It's akin to a mythical treant that hasn't fully developed its intelligence."
Without hesitation, Lumian extended his left hand, passing through the crimson-flaming cloak and robe made of flesh and blood. He grasped the pewter-black dirk adorned with sinister patterns.
Bending his body slightly, engulfed in flowing crimson flames, he sprinted toward the trunk of the Tree of Shadow, swift as a cheetah. Along the way, he leaped agilely, evading the cracks and blooming gigantic flowers.
Observing Lumian's new course of action, Susanna Mattise didn't pay too much heed. She didn't believe he could truly harm the Tree of Shadow or her. Nevertheless, she remained cautious. She intended to kindle his desires and fabricate corresponding illusions, luring him to "unite" with a certain flower or crevice in the tree.
Susanna Mattise's emerald eyes reflected Lumian's figure, draped in a robe of flesh and blood and adorned with a flaming cloak. Moisture welled up in her eyes instantly.
She had hoped to witness Lumian abruptly changing his direction and pouncing upon the colossal light-colored flower. Yet, Lumian appeared unaffected as he charged toward the brownish-green trunk.
Beneath the flaming cloak, Lumian clutched the Mysticism Smelling Salts in his right hand, holding it close to his nose.
Tears welled in his eyes, obstructing his sneeze. However, with the aid of the Alms Monk's endurance, he managed to endure it.
Susanna Mattise was puzzled. With her level and Sequence, even if the other party repeatedly sniffed the Mysticism Smelling Salts, he shouldn't remain completely unaffected.
Under normal circumstances, given the disparity in their strength, she could easily induce Lumian to sneeze while he searched for light-colored giant flowers or brownish-green crevices and continued inhaling the Mysticism Smelling Salts.
Of course, there was a possibility of failure in such situations, but it was unquestionably lower than the probability of success.
But now, Susanna Mattise's initial attempt had proven futile. It was as if a skilled dice thrower had surprisingly rolled the lowest

number.
Achoo!
Lumian let out a loud sneeze.
Seizing the moment while his mind remained clear and Susanna hadn't exerted her influence a second time, he shielded the metal canister with his right finger and thrust the Fallen Mercury at the brownish-green trunk of the Tree of Shadow, aiming for the needle-sized hole he had created with the burning-white spear.
A resounding clang echoed as Fallen Mercury failed to penetrate any deeper, as if it had struck an impenetrable iron plate.
Achoo!
Lumian, having inhaled a substantial amount of the Mysticism Smelling Salts, sneezed once more, shaking off yet another desire incited by Susanna. Her attempts faltered once again.
Lumian's right hand, gripping the metal canister, surged with crimson flames.
It absorbed the engulfing cloak of fire that adorned his body, swiftly condensing into a blazing white boxing glove.
In the next instant, Lumian raised his right fist and hammered it against the hilt of Fallen Mercury, resembling a blacksmith forging a weapon.
A thunderous boom erupted as the incandescent white boxing glove detached from Lumian's hand and detonated at the rear end of Fallen Mercury.
Boom!
Lumian's left palm, holding the dirk, was charred and mangled in several places. As for Fallen Mercury, propelled by the force of the explosive impact, it managed to break through the first layer of bark and penetrate into the core trunk of the Tree of Shadow.

Chapter 256: Crack

The searing pain in Lumian's left palm from the explosion nearly caused him to instinctively draw his pewter-black dirk, which had already been plunged into the core trunk of the Tree of Shadow.

Drawing upon his resilience and experience with similar injuries, he fought to control his body's reflexive reactions.

As his mind cleared from the stimulation, he managed to shake off the two desires imposed by Susanna Mattise.

Pain and rationality entwined, engulfing his mind, followed by a terrifying torrent of scenes.

These were the accumulated experiences of the Tree of Shadow over the past millennium, countless fragments of desire that had nourished and formed its trunk. They represented the potential futures of this malevolent tree.

They converged in a mercury-colored illusory river, flooding Lumian's thoughts like a deluge.

Not only were there an overwhelming number of scenes that could overpower any Low-Sequence Beyonder, but some scenes compelled Lumian to instinctively ignore or overlook them, unable to muster the courage to look or discern.

Just when he thought his intellect would be crushed by the immense torrent and reduced to a blank canvas, he realized that he had endured it. It was as if there existed an additional space capable of accommodating countless scenes beyond the limit.

Lumian wasted no time in choosing the fate he wished to exchange. Guided by his intuition for danger and spiritual instincts, he selected a scene:

A brownish-green root extended towards the depths of an ancient structure, devoured by an unseen flame that silently burned in the darkness, casting an eerie glow over the area.

With a crack, the tree root snapped and descended into the shadows. Purple flames surfaced, swiftly transforming into a color indistinguishable to the naked eye. In an instant, it dissipated, leaving no trace behind.

Lumian withdrew Fallen Mercury and exerted all his strength to pry open this fate, but it remained unresponsive.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

Brownish-green tree trunks, not excessively thick, hurtled towards Lumian like javelins precisely thrown by a platoon of soldiers.

Each one possessed the potential to impale and skewer a target upon the gnarled tree roots.

In the ethereal canopy of the tree, Susanna Mattise's emerald eyes widened as she attempted to employ various abilities related to

desires—be it for sex, food, greed, or acting—but all in vain. Opting for the tree spirit's powers, she aimed to deliver a physical blow.
Bound to the Tree of Shadow, the methods available to her were far more potent than those of her counterparts who relied on ordinary trees as companions.
Though she still doubted that the so-called Cursed Blade could harm the Tree of Shadow, Lumian's confidence and performance left her somewhat uneasy. Subconsciously, she believed it wiser to disrupt whatever he was doing.
She would rather err on the side of believing it to be seriously harmful and take excessive precautions in advance than be careless and witness unforeseen changes and the possibility of failure.
The former would at most waste a certain amount of strength and energy, delaying the completion of the ritual a little. The latter might bring about changes she didn't want to see and an outcome of failure.
Even if the probability was low, she had to take preventative measures. She couldn't wait until it happened before attempting to rectify it.
The flesh robe enveloping Lumian's body abruptly contracted, diminishing his size and evading the majority of the javelin-like tree trunks.
Two of them landed on Lumian's left and right shoulders, leaving him unable to dodge or evade.
The flesh and blood constituting the robe acted as disciplined soldiers receiving an order. They surged towards the impending strike, constructing layers of blood-colored cushions.
With a resounding impact, the layers of flesh were pierced by the two brownish-green tree spears. More flesh surged forth, hurriedly filling the void.
Although Mr. K's finger had transformed into a robe of flesh and blood to mitigate the damage, Lumian's legs buckled under the force akin to that of a sledgehammer, causing him to tumble backward.
In that moment, he felt the fate of the brownish-green tree root, which had been burned by the invisible flames, loosen its grip.
The illusory power prying it loose didn't solely belong to Lumian, but also to his left chest, emanating from an unknown source.
Gritting his teeth, Lumian utilized the momentum of his fall to laboriously stir up that fate. With great difficulty, he transformed it into a droplet of mercury and exchanged it with the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost, stored within the pewter-black dirk.

With a crisp crack, fractures spread across Fallen Mercury, as if it struggled to bear the burden of fate. Some fractures were unnaturally long, others were delicate, and some ran straight through the blade.

With a thud, Lumian collapsed onto the coiled tree roots entrenched in the ground, freeing himself from the lingering forces of the brownish-green tree javelins.

His shoulder throbbed with pain, but he remained physically unharmed. The robe woven of flesh and blood began to disintegrate, trickling down, obstructing the pale-colored flower and the brownish-green crack as they unfurled their "mouths" in an attempt to devour Lumian. When he collapsed, he crushed them.

With a resounding boom, crimson flames erupted, consuming the malevolent entities. Seizing the opportunity, Lumian swiftly rolled over and maneuvered to a relatively safe position.

Only then did Lumian recall a crucial issue. Amidst dodging attacks from trees, branches, leaves, vines, roots, and flowers, and taking whiffs of the Mysticism Smelling Salts, he whispered amidst sneezes,

"Encountering the Montsouris ghost... Achoo! ...doesn't necessarily mean that the Montsouris ghost will attack immediately!"

If it took a while, what was the point of his previous efforts?

Disregarding the fact that the Montsouris ghost would assault the Tree of Shadow every month or two, even if it attacked every four to five minutes, Lumian found it despairing. When the time came, the preparations for the ritual would surely be complete. The sacrificial ceremony would have already commenced. Under the watchful eyes of the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, there was a high likelihood that the Montsouris ghost would choose to wait a while before returning, based on its previous patterns.

Termiboros's majestic voice resonated within Lumian's body and ears once again.

"It approaches. It is a destined fate."

In the ethereal canopy of the tree, Susanna ceased her attacks on Lumian. Utilizing the Tree of Shadow, she remotely guided Charlotte in controlling the sacrifice while delving her consciousness into the brownish-green tree, searching for any potential issues resulting from the pewter-black dirk's assault.

The sooner she discovered it, the sooner she could resolve it and propel the sacrificial ritual forward!

Upon hearing Termiboros's words, Lumian couldn't help but inquire, "Can the Montsouris ghost truly destroy the Tree of Shadow?"

Although both entities were malevolent, the giant tree that had been rooted in Trier's soil for over a thousand years, nourished by countless desires, and linked to a hidden evil god, appeared loftier, more menacing, and more wicked.
Termiboros's deep voice resounded, "No. However, it possesses the ability to influence the Tree of Shadow to some extent, creating an opportunity for you to escape."
Just as Termiboros finished speaking, Lumian caught sight of a sudden black shadow beside him.
The figure stood slightly hunched, resembling an elderly man burdened by the weight of life.
The Montsouris ghost!
It had bypassed numerous restrictions and obstacles to arrive in the alternate space occupied by the Tree of Shadow.
With a single stride, the stooped figure reached the edge of the brownish-green trunk. Susanna and Charlotte noticed its presence. They instinctively sensed a threat, yet they didn't connect the black shadow to Trier's legend of the Montsouris ghost.
Frantically, they stirred up the various desires of the Montsouris ghost, but their efforts were like stones cast into an unfathomable abyss. There was no response whatsoever.
For the first time, Lumian beheld the true appearance of the Montsouris ghost.
It was neither an elderly man nor even human. It more closely resembled a viscous black shadow taking on a human form, hunching its back.
The Montsouris ghost fixed its gaze upon the Tree of Shadow for two seconds before pressing itself against the brownish-green trunk.
In an instant, it transformed into a malevolent, pitch-black liquid that corroded the layers of tree bark.
A sizable pool of moist darkness spread across the surface of the massive tree trunk, steadily contaminating its surroundings and expanding its reach.
Within moments, the entire lower portion of the Tree of Shadow was overtaken by the black shadow, rendering Susanna Mattise and Charlotte Calvino's attacks futile.
The next second, the oil-painting-like blue sky and white clouds, along with the ground intertwined with tree roots, trembled visibly as if experiencing a violent earthquake.
Faint illusory cracks appeared on the surface of the tree trunk, the ground, and even in the sky. Some of them slowly widened, revealing glimpses of the street beyond—a distorted microcosm of chaos influenced by branches, vines, and desire.

"Be prepared," Termiboros's grand voice echoed in Lumian's ears.
Realizing that she couldn't halt the Montsouris ghost and that the situation was rapidly deteriorating, Susanna Mattise wore a resentful expression and recited an incantation in ancient Hermes, "Son of the God who should never have been born, you are a cage for the imprisoning curse, an evil that erodes history. I implore your assistance."
The instant Susanna Mattise finished speaking, the branches beneath the ethereal tree crown began to "secrete" a viscous, pitch-black liquid.
It bore a striking resemblance to the black liquid assumed by the Montsouris ghost, but there was a significant distinction. It possessed a greater degree of chaos, frenzy, and wickedness.
Almost simultaneously, pale-white, malformed skulls, yellowish eyeballs entwined with thick veins, scarlet tongues dripping with repulsive pus, and indescribably grotesque objects that induced madness by mere sight sprouted from the liquid secreted by the tree trunk.
...
In the untamed wilderness, where Madam Judgment and Lady Moon engaged in their fierce battle, Rue Anarchie and other locations lay scattered. The brownish-green tree swayed ominously, while tiny cracks that appeared to pierce the very fabric of reality spread across its surface and surroundings.
Suddenly, an illusory door materialized in the sky, layer upon layer.
From the midst of these doors emerged a lady clad in an orange dress, her appearance exuding a languid aura. Worms emitting resplendent starlight wriggled in and out of her visage, obscuring her true features from discernment.
With purposeful strides, the woman approached the brownish-green tree, extending her hands to grasp the sides of an invisible crack, as if intent on tearing it open!

Chapter 257: The Unfortunate

Transparent maggots, shimmering under the starlight's embrace, wriggled out from the lady's relaxed palm, their movements concealed within an elusive crack. The crack, once invisible, now bore the hue of starlight.

With a vigorous pull, the transparent veil veiling this world let out a terrifying groan, unable to bear the weight. It parted forcefully, yielding to the unstoppable momentum.

Amidst an indescribable shattering, the crevice ripped apart, transforming into a colossal cavity adorned with glimmering starry specks.

It resembled the entrance to a tunnel leading to an unknown realm.

In a mere instant, the woman in the orange dress vanished from the wilderness.

Seated within the cradle carriage, Lady Moon's expression flickered. She commanded the Demon-like creatures pulling the carriage to follow her into the tunnel.

Madam Judgment trailed closely behind.

...

In a world where tree roots intertwined and ethereal clouds resembled oil paintings.

As the branches of the otherworldly tree secreted viscous black liquid and peculiar entities sprouted, Lumian felt his mind teetering on the edge of madness, despite Termiboros's warning not to gaze skyward.

His skin prickled, and the flesh beneath twitched unnaturally, as if masses or tumors were about to form.

At that moment, pure starlight bathed the world, casting its radiance upon Lumian's eyes.

Not far from him, a minuscule crack instantaneously expanded into a mystical and enigmatic door of starlight.

"Shut your eyes and rush through the doorway," Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian clutched Fallen Mercury tightly with his bloodied left hand and sprinted toward the starlit door.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Lumian relied on a Hunter's instinctual understanding of spatial location and precise distance, reaching his destination within a few strides. Unperturbed by the changes around him or the lurking dangers, he leaped into the unknown.

After a brief bout of dizziness, Lumian sensed as though he had ascended from the depths of a profound lake, his entire being

easing.
He opened his eyes and beheld the brownish-green silhouette of the Shadow Tree not far away, Auberge du Coq Doré, and other buildings cloaked in branches and vines. He witnessed streets divided by peculiar forces in various sections of the wilderness, merchants and passersby indulging in their individual desires, and Franca gracefully leaping from a second-story window of Auberge du Coq Doré.
He had departed from the alternate realm within the Tree of Shadows, yet he had not returned to the tangible world.
Franca also caught sight of Lumian nearby. She exclaimed with excitement, "Hurry, find the exit!"
Although she had "summoned" Madam Judgment and felt a measure of confidence, she desired no lingering stay in this place.
How could a mere Sequence 7 like herself partake in a battle involving demigods? Even observing from a distance posed significant risks.
Lumian nodded and sprinted toward Franca, scanning his surroundings for any signs of an exit.
The more he surveyed, the more he sensed the resemblance to Paramita, a boon from the Great Mother. However, there were no hordes of undead or Demons casting sinners into the abyss.
Could it be that the Bliss Society's operation involved the followers of the Great Mother? Lumian swiftly formed a hypothesis and shouted to Franca, who was mere inches away, "To the edge of the wilderness!"
Drawing from his experience, if this place was indeed Paramita, they should be able to escape from the wilderness's periphery.
Franca nodded slightly and followed, without questioning his instruction.
Suddenly, the wilderness convulsed with a violent quake, and a low rumble echoed from within the brownish-green tree.
The sky darkened, and the world itself teetered on the brink of collapse.
The branches and vines that had ensnared the buildings and streets swiftly withdrew. Vendors, pedestrians, and residents, caught in the grip of their desires, snapped out of their dazed states.
They ceased their ravenous feasting, released their grip on their partners, and rose in fear. Bloodied and bewildered, they halted their savage violence and looked around in a state of confusion...
In Auberge du Coq Doré, the bickering eloping couple ceased their romp. Oblivious to the wrongness of their actions, they were perplexed as to why the sky had darkened so drastically, as if

evening had descended upon them.
Anthony Reid, trembling beneath a wooden table, regained his composure. He emerged and peered out the window, his expression darkening.
Gabriel, who had been frantically signing his name, suddenly regained his senses. He wondered if the stress had taken its toll on his sanity while he polished the Lightseeker script, incorporating the theater manager's feedback.
Pavard Neeson, owner of the underground bar, set aside his paintbrush but couldn't tear his gaze away from the drawing board. Though he had only sketched it hastily, he felt it was the most remarkable work he had ever produced. It surpassed even his loftiest standards. Unconsciously, he yearned to return to that state, but he couldn't.
In the blink of an eye, all the branches and vines retracted into the Tree of Shadows. Most of the vendors, pedestrians, and residents, who had regained their senses, beheld the ominously terrifying brownish-green tree.
They didn't understand what had transpired, but fear propelled them to swiftly flee from the Tree of Shadows, heeding their instinctual warnings.
In that moment, Susanna Mattise, her turquoise hair flowing, materialized atop the ethereal tree crown. Below her stood Charlotte Calvino, wearing an expression of disappointment, frustration, and hatred.
The escape of the sacrificial offering signaled a temporary failure in their sacrifice. They promptly departed the alternate realm to evade the repercussions of the demigod-level clash.
Susanna Mattise, beset by the backlash and the influence of godhood, appeared increasingly ethereal, as if she could dissipate at any moment.
Lumian and Franca, racing toward the wilderness's edge, flickered in her weakened gaze, yet she lacked the power to influence them.
Under normal circumstances, her fusion with the Tree of Shadows granted her the ability to exert her powers from a distance. However, the backlash from the interrupted ritual and the uncontrolled corruption following the Son of God's descent had nearly claimed her life. She was now in an extremely feeble state.
The tenacious and evil spirit that she was, Susanna Mattise refused to surrender so easily. She yearned to capture Lumian and drag him back into the Tree of Shadows to resume the unfinished ritual.
Once again, the branches and vines of the Tree of Shadows swiftly extended, ensnaring a hapless vendor and hoisting him aloft.

Their thorns pierced his flesh, absorbing the vital essence that could rejuvenate Susanna.
It was akin to utilizing the Tree of Shadows to enter a dream-like state, draining energy to gradually lead the target to their demise through a sinister encounter. However, the process had become crude and expedited—an accelerated ordeal!
Vendors, pedestrians, and residents trapped within the wilderness erupted in terrified screams as they frantically fled upon witnessing the surge of brownish-green branch and vine monstrosities and their companions being hoisted into the air.
The eloping couple, wrapped tightly in a blanket, darted out of Auberge du Coq Doré, following in Anthony Reid's wake toward the wilderness's edge. Behind them trailed Gabriel, Pavard Neeson, and the tenants who hadn't yet departed for work. Before them swarmed vendors and pedestrians in a chaotic scramble.
One by one, fleeing escapees were snatched up by tree branches and vines, their cries for help piercing the air.
The peddler, who had once served Lumian extra Whiskey Sour, stumbled over a rock on the ground. In utter despair, he witnessed turquoise vines creeping up his body, layer upon layer, engulfing him entirely.
Sensing the commotion, Lumian turned his head and fixated on the scene for several seconds before gradually slowing his pace.
Upon witnessing this, Franca cursed, "Do you plan to go back and save them? Dammit! Know your place. You're just a wanted criminal, a mob leader!"
Lumian didn't come to a halt, but he didn't hasten his steps either.
He and Franca drew ever nearer to the edge of the wilderness.
In that very moment, Lumian's ears resonated with the majestic voice of Termiboros.
This time, the angel of Inevitability did not deliver sentences one by one. Instead, He injected a lengthy paragraph into Lumian's consciousness at intervals.
"Have you not come to terms with your destiny?
"After enduring the might of Inevitability, there shall naturally be a corresponding corruption.
"From the moment Cordu was obliterated, you became the unfortunate one.
"It was not I who exerted influence over you in many past matters; rather, it was your hapless fate playing its part.
"As an unfortunate soul, not only shall you suffer ill fortune, but so too shall those around you and those close to you.
"If it were not for your lack of knowledge in mysticism, which allowed Susanna Mattise to uncover the issue within your body

and begin contacting Hugues Artois about employing the chemical plant explosion for the sacrificial arrangement, Jenna's mother would not have taken her own life, and Jenna's brother would not have descended into madness.
"If you had been cautious enough, when Flameng regained consciousness and drank with you, you would have remembered to seek an opportunity to engage a genuine psychiatrist. He may not have chosen the path of suicide.
"If you had not merely forewarned Ruhr, but also restricted his movements, he would not have succumbed to the illness once more and met a swift demise. Michel would not have lost her will to live.
"All this misfortune has been brought upon them by you.
"My existence is not solely a trump card that grants you boons and the power to deter others, but also an inescapable curse.
"Only by bowing to Inevitability and releasing me from my seal can your misfortune come to an end.
"If you continue on this path, you shall be unable to save those whom you wish to save. You shall be unable to protect those whom you wish to protect. You shall only amplify their misfortunes.
"When the time comes, those pleading for help here shall perish.
"Gabriel shall perish.
"Charlie shall perish.
"Jenna shall perish.
"Franca, too, shall meet her demise."
Lumian came to a sudden halt, his countenance twisted in anguish. He could no longer conceal the pain that consumed him.
Franca called out once more, "Get a grip! It's all well and good to do good deeds when everything is fine. But now, we need to escape and seek help from official Beyonders! Who knows what will come of those demigod battles? Susanna is now like an empowered Sequence 5 with some godlike abilities. She's not someone we can handle!
"Those people don't expect assistance from a villain who enjoys playing pranks on them!"
In the vicinity of the brownish-green tree, numerous individuals already dangled from its branches.
With a swoosh, Gabriel was hoisted up by a few green vines, and the scattered pages of the Lightseeker script fluttered to the ground.
Pavard Neeson, the owner of the underground bar, stood beside him, his body impaled by a protruding spike.
Among the eloping couple, the woman stumbled and ran slower,

eventually tripping over a branch and becoming ensnared by the vines.
The young man wrapped in a blanket grew alarmed and continued onward. However, after a few steps, he abruptly halted, cursing himself.
"Dogsh*t!"
Before he could finish his sentence, he had already spun around and dashed back toward his partner. Clenching his teeth, he sought to tear at the vines and help her free.
Desperate cries and terrified screams reverberated through the wilderness.
Lumian's fists clenched involuntarily.
Suddenly, he let out a chuckle and spoke.
"Then, are you considered close to me? After all, you reside within my body. Will you also encounter misfortune?
"I know I will face countless failures, yet I will persist again and again in pursuit of that elusive and seemingly insignificant hope!
"If I had chosen to surrender, I would have been defeated long ago!
"And now, there is still a chance for success."
With that, Lumian took another step and continued his sprint toward the edge of the wilderness.
Although Franca couldn't comprehend his mutterings, she was glad to see that he had made a wise decision.
Two to three seconds later, the two of them reached the wilderness's edge. Lumian deliberately maintained a distance from Franca, then suddenly extended his arms and pushed her out.
Caught off guard, Franca watched in shock as her body gradually left the wilderness. She turned to gaze at Lumian.
Lumian smiled and spoke gently, "Once, I shared their despair, pain, and longing for aid. And during that time, someone extended a helping hand to me."
With those words, he pivoted and sprinted toward the brownish-green tree.
In the dim expanse of the wilderness, crimson flames ignited upon his body. This time, the fiery cloak no longer isolated him from his garments, scorching his skin and flesh.
He intended to use the constant pain to resist the diverse desires he would encounter next!
As he ran, his gaze locked onto Susanna, her turquoise hair entwined. Yet, he "saw" not only the Fallen Tree Spirit, but also the figure etched in his memory.
The one who had illuminated his path.

Chapter 258: Assassin

Susanna's eyes fixed on Lumian as he dashed towards her, his body engulfed in crimson flames. She absorbed energy from the surrounding crowd, including peddlers, pedestrians, and tenants hanging from the trees. Her goal was to restore her combat abilities as quickly as possible.

She wasn't worried about Lumian causing her harm. Positioned at the top of the tree crown, she knew he couldn't reach her. Moreover, she was one with the Tree of Shadow, making her nearly invulnerable. Without godhood, any attack would only cause minor injuries, incapable of killing or severely harming her.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Lumian sprinted into an area where tree branches and vines entangled, with a hundred to two hundred humans dangling from above.

The brownish-green foliage tried to ensnare and pierce him, but his fiery aura forced them to retreat in panic.

Suddenly, a rumbling sound shook the ground. The brownish-green tree descended rapidly, shrinking its height to seven to eight meters.

The violent tremors across the wilderness made it difficult for Lumian to advance.

...

Rumble. A tremor like an earthquake shook the crystal chandelier in the banquet hall. Terrified expressions appeared on the faces of most people present. Quick-thinking individuals sought shelter under the long table draped in a white tablecloth.

The team assigned to protect Hugues Artois consisted of Imre, a mixed-blood individual, Valentine, and a Warrior pathway Beyonder named Antoine.

Sensing the anomaly simultaneously, they tacitly sent Imre to investigate. He rushed to the window and peered out, trying to locate the source of the disturbance.

Imre observed that several houses in Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches had tilted to a certain degree, but they had not collapsed. Their surfaces were covered with brownish-green branches and vines.

In comparison, the prominent feature was the brownish-green tree, situated roughly on Rue Anarchie. It descended, adorned with numerous tree tumors and flowers.

The scene lasted only a few seconds before returning to normal, as if an unsuccessful painting had been replaced by another work.

"What's happening?" Hugues Artois calmly approached the window and inquired.

Imre didn't hold back any information. He lowered his voice and replied sincerely, "Anomalies have occurred on Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches."
Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, Rue des Blouses Blanches... As Jenna, who had approached a nearby window but missed witnessing the scene, heard the street names, her feet froze in place.
Two names immediately surfaced in her mind: Ciel, Franca...
Had they encountered the anomaly? Jenna's heart sank, and she instinctively looked at Hugues Artois.
She noticed a curl forming on the member of parliament's lips, as if he couldn't hide his delight.
It's him... It's him and his group of heretics! Jenna's mind instantly reached a conclusion. Darkness enveloped her, and despair surged through her uncontrollably.
Could Franca and Ciel withstand the planned attack by the heretics and survive this anomaly?
Should I rush to their aid with my current strength? Or will I only bring harm to them?
At that moment, Jenna felt as if the pillars supporting her—her two friends who had always stood by her side—were about to crumble, just as she had lost her mother.
And it was all the fault of the heretics, of Hugues Artois!
Her thoughts drifted to Franca's words when she consumed the potion and transformed into an Assassin, warning Jenna to avoid contact with evil gods.
"Contact with evil gods will bring nothing but disaster.
"Not only will it drive a person to madness and strip away their true self, but it will also drag everyone around them into darkness, whether they know them or not.
"If we don't eliminate those individuals, the influence of the evil gods will persist. The pain will return again and again, unending."
And now, Hugues Artois stood at the center of all the market district's disasters.
Jenna lowered her head, unable to meet Hugues Artois's gaze, afraid that her eyes would betray the pain and hatred within.
Hatred consumed her!
Yet, she could only remind herself that her brother Julien was still alive, albeit with a certain mental ailment that could be cured. If he lost his sister next, he might truly spiral into irredeemable madness.
After the banquet concludes, after the factory owners provide their "compensation," and after I settle all our debts, I'll take Julien and leave the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique. We'll

find another place to live, far from the ensuing pain... Jenna repeated these words to herself, desperately trying to contain her emotions.
"Why is there another anomaly?" Hugues Artois questioned Imre, Valentine, and Antoine.
Imre offered a bitter smile and replied, "I witnessed that tree. It has appeared multiple times in Trier's history, but it has never been fully resolved."
Ever since joining the Purifier team in Trier, he had learned about the hidden dangers lurking beneath the ground that couldn't be entirely purified. The brownish-green tree was one of them.
He, his superiors, and his teammates couldn't fathom why Trier had been established atop such things in the first place.
Without giving Hugues Artois time to question their capabilities any further, Imre added,
"Now that the anomaly has been discovered, it won't be long before it's suppressed."
As a member of the elite Purifier team, he knew that Trier differed from other countries' capitals. Due to the perpetual underground dangers, both the former royal family and the current parliamentary government had agreed to the two Churches' secret dispatching of an angel each or placed Grade 0 Sealed Artifacts in Trier to prevent any mishaps.
Of course, during periods when the royal family and government held immense power, the Church's angels refrained from interfering. For example, during Emperor Roselle's reign.
Once the anomaly caused by the peculiar tree was exposed, it would swiftly face a devastating blow. Although it couldn't be completely eradicated, it would be kept under control for a considerable time.
...
After the swift and violent descent of the Tree of Shadow, the wilderness stabilized. Gabriel, Pavard Neeson, and the others remained suspended from the branches, their faces growing pale and blackened, as if drained of energy.
Lumian regained his balance and continued sprinting towards the nearby brownish-green tree, still engulfed in crimson flames.
At that moment, Susanna Mattise had regained a significant portion of her strength. Lumian's figure appeared in her eyes, awaiting his approach within the range of her current abilities.
Behind Lumian, a shadow detached itself from its owner and stealthily lunged at his back.
It was Charlotte Calvino, "acting" as a shadow!
Having not been the host of the ritual and being far from the

treetop, she had not suffered the backlash or intense corruption, thus her strength had not waned. Seeing Lumian turn around, she quickly hid herself, and put to show her acting abilities, ready to execute a surprise attack.
Suddenly, a gunshot pierced through the air in the distance.
The iron-black bullet was too distant and lacked precision. It grazed Charlotte's body, but it disrupted her plans.
Wearing a blouse, light-colored breeches, and red boots, Franca emerged at the edge of the wilderness, clutching a brass revolver. She cursed at Lumian's retreating form and shouted, "F*ck, don't you think I'm on your team?"
...
Noticing that the street had returned to its "normal" state, Hugues Artois made his way back to the center of the banquet hall, holding a glass of light-gold champagne. Standing before the gathering, he began his speech as usual.
"Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to have you join us for this condolence banquet. Please join me in a moment of silence to honor those who have tragically departed...
"As you can see, yet another accident has occurred in the market district. We cannot continue like this. We must establish a more efficient and adaptable system to handle such situations.
"I understand that many of you harbor anger and fear in light of the recent accident. Your loved ones may have lost their lives, sustained severe injuries, or perhaps experienced agitation, mental breakdowns, and madness as a result of this..."
Jenna's head shot up upon hearing these words, her gaze fixed on Hugues Artois once more.
He had just mentioned "agitation, mental breakdowns, and madness" in such specific detail.
Under normal circumstances, such elaboration would not be necessary. A simple reference to insanity would suffice.
Did Hugues Artois know that someone would suffer a mental breakdown due to the chemical plant explosion and go mad? And was he deliberately mentioning it in his speech, as if a criminal returning to the crime scene, reveling in his sinister handiwork?
An absurd mix of hatred and fear consumed Jenna's heart.
If her suspicions were correct, Julien's mental breakdown might have been influenced by the heretics!
Could he be cured? Could he be saved?
If I don't sever the source, even if I leave the market district with Julien, there might still be hidden dangers and lingering problems in the future! The feeling of desperation overwhelmed Jenna, as if she were trapped in an inescapable darkness.

Her pupils dilated, reflecting Hugues Artois's figure with a chilling clarity.
Imre, Valentine, and Antoine's expressions darkened, their gazes falling, as they heard Hugues Artois's implicit accusations against the two Churches.
...
The alternate space that accompanied the Tree of Shadow lay in ruins. Some areas were coated with pitch-black mucus, while others bore gaping holes, as if swallowed by an endless void.
Suddenly, a glimmer of light emerged from the shrunken door of starlight.
It grew brighter and brighter, akin to a transformed sun, illuminating every nook and cranny with an eerie clarity, banishing all shadows.
A female figure draped in a white robe adorned with golden threads emerged from the radiant source. She appeared to be crafted from pure light, translucent and ethereal. With emerald green eyes and flowing blond hair, she exuded beauty and a divine aura.
The guardian angel of Trier, Saint Vièvе.
...
Amidst the applause, Hugues Artois, having concluded his speech, mingled with the families of the victims, champagne glass in hand. He displayed enthusiasm, friendliness, and a trustworthy demeanor.
Jenna closed her eyes and wandered towards the long table dressed in a white tablecloth. She picked up a plate and placed some food on it, then grabbed a long silver fork and began to eat.
As she ate, she slowly approached Hugues Artois in a daze.
Drawing near, just two meters away, she assumed a stance that suggested a conversation with Monsieur Member of Parliament.
Surrounded by his team and guarded by official Beyonders, Hugues Artois noticed Jenna. He smiled warmly, anticipating her approach.
Jenna passed by Secretary Rhône and positioned herself a step away from Hugues Artois.
Before their conversation could commence, the ground trembled once more, accompanied by a resounding rumble. Rue Anarchie and Rue des Blouses Blanches seemed to brighten significantly.
Cassandra, Hugues Artois, and the others turned their bodies instinctively, gazing out of the window, their concern evident.
Witnessing this, Jenna closed her eyes once more. Then, she took a step forward, raising the silver fork in her hand towards Hugues Artois!

All the emotions suppressed within her heart erupted.
You wretched politician, the bringer of disaster and darkness to the market district!
You heretic, your conscience devoured by a dog!
You are the bastard responsible for my mother's death and my brother's descent into madness!
Perish now!
Without your demise, the suffering in the market district shall never cease. Darkness shall engulf this place, preventing the dawn from breaking.
Indeed, with heretics surrounding you and the protection of official Beyonders, anyone attempting to confront you would meet their demise here, dissuaded by the risk.
But what if an assassin has no intention of leaving alive?
Jenna channeled all her hatred, outrage, and pain into the long-handled silver fork in her grasp. She unleashed an Assassin's Mighty Blow, aiming for Hugues Artois's exposed right eye as he turned his body.
In that moment, she glimpsed the surprise, confusion, and fear etched upon his face. She witnessed Hugues Artois frantically glancing towards Cassandra, pleading for assistance.
Cassandra's line of sight was obstructed by Purifier Imre, who had subtly stepped diagonally, leaving her unaware of the imminent danger.
With a squelching sound, the long-handled silver fork in Jenna's right hand plunged deep into Hugues Artois's eye socket, piercing into his brain.
Hugues Artois's expression froze. The fear, confusion, and terror remained etched on his visage. Time did not permit much change, only revealing a profound sense of despair.
Jenna watched as crimson blood gushed forth, and Hugues Artois's countenance gradually crumbled under the lights. Surrounding her, red sparks erupted, whether from firearms or supernatural abilities. She closed her eyes with a serene smile, surrendering to her fate.
Mother, I see the light.

Chapter 259: Awe

Hugues Artois's initial reaction was one of surprise and confusion as he beheld the glimmering silver light emanating from the long-handled fork, thrusting menacingly towards him.

He found it hard to fathom that someone would attempt to assassinate him, a well-protected member of parliament, under these circumstances.

The assassin didn't appear particularly formidable.

Despite being a retired veteran, he had left military service five years ago to pursue a career in politics. His combat skills were no longer honed. With the adversary a mere step apart, evading the attack effectively seemed impossible.

Disregarding him, even a Sequence 9 or even a Sequence 8 Beyonder would likely struggle to dodge a Mighty Blow from an Assassin, especially one who had stealthily approached them. It all depended on whether their abilities could help them avoid vital areas or reduce the damage, thus preventing instant death.

Naturally, some Sequence 8 or 9 Beyonders possessed the ability to sense danger or hostility ahead of time, thwarting the approach and attack of Assassins.

In an instant, Hugues Artois cast his gaze upon the red-haired Cassandra, the three official Beyonders, and his subordinates Rhône, Margaret, and Boduva, feeling intense fear grip him.

However, what met his eyes was Cassandra's red hair—her body and line of sight obscured by the mixed-blood Imre—as well as the calm and indifferent gazes of the official Beyonders, Imre and Antoine. Valentine had reacted immediately but restrained himself, and Rhône, Margaret, and Boduva, though eager to use their Beyonder powers to save him, dared not expose their boons obtained from the evil gods.

At that moment, Hugues Artois was overwhelmed by a profound sense of despair.

You all, save me!

Save me!

With a squelching sound, the long-handled silver fork plunged mercilessly into Hugues Artois's right eye, propelled with all the force Jenna could muster. It pierced through the eye socket, penetrating the brain, with only a small portion of the handle protruding outside.

Hugues Artois's thoughts became hazy.

He yearned to reach out and grasp something, but his arm wouldn't even rise.

I haven't become president... I haven't witnessed the arrival of

great existences... I haven't received the boon of godhood... I cannot die like this... Slain by a feeble Assassin... I-I don't wish to perish...
A barrage of thoughts flashed through Hugues Artois's mind as gunshots resounded in his ears.
His body slumped to the ground, and darkness enveloped his vision once more.
Thud. Hugues Artois, member of parliament for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, collapsed onto the ground, his heart ceasing to beat.
Jenna, her eyes shut and a smile adorning her face, was struck by bullets fired by nearby Bureau 7 agents.
One bullet struck her shoulder, and another pierced her ribs from the opposite side.
The pain contorted her expression instinctively. Her body involuntarily recoiled, as if she wished to curl up into a protective ball.
She opened her eyes and beheld Rhône and the other devotees of the evil gods glaring at her with hatred and an unnatural panic, yet refraining from attacking.
In the next instant, a golden revolver, its chamber loaded, pressed against Jenna's head. Imre surveyed the room and declared, "I have already subdued the assassin. Verify if Monsieur Member of Parliament can be saved and maintain order. No one should leave for the time being."
He made it clear that he intended to escort Jenna back to Église Saint-Robert or inquire on the spot about the motive behind the assassination and the mastermind, preventing Cassandra and the others from venting their rage.
...
As the Tree of Shadow descended, the various streets reverted to their original state, yet they remained engulfed in wilderness.
Lumian perceived that Susanna Mattise could no longer stir his desires from a distance as she did before. So, he turned around, intending to confront Charlotte first.
The crimson flames enveloping his body burned with intensity, scorching his garments and searing his skin and flesh to varying degrees, inflicting constant pain.
This torment stimulated his mind, allowing him to maintain a certain level of clarity. He could also rely on the endurance bestowed by the Alms Monk boon to sustain his thoughts and actions, instead of merely focusing on enduring the agony.
Even for Pyromaniacs, such incineration posed a threat. Moreover, as time passed, the damage would worsen, eventually endangering their lives.

Of course, long before that point, Lumian's spirituality would likely crumble. He could only allow the flames to extinguish on their own.
Were it not for the Alms Monk boon and the internal struggle within the Tree of Shadow, his spirituality would have been strained by the self-immolation.
Upon seeing Lumian turn and observe "Red Boots" Franca dashing toward her with a brass classic revolver, sliding across a layer of frost formed beneath her feet, Charlotte abandoned her plans for a surprise attack. Instead, she readied herself to return to the Tree of Shadow, where she could exploit the environment and enhance her abilities to confront the enemy.
Her body instantaneously grew pliable, as though secreting a slimy substance.
She "acted" as a serpent-like creature, utilizing the intertwining vines and branches to swiftly retreat toward the brownish-green tree.
At that moment, Charlotte's body froze.
It was akin to facing a dragon head-on, confronting a predator at the apex of the biological hierarchy. She couldn't help but tremble with fear and overwhelming panic.
She circled her immediate vicinity and ran haphazardly, as if fleeing from an unseen adversary.
Not far from her, Anthony Reid, the information broker, emerged from behind an iron-black gas street lamp post, suspended by the vines and branches of the Auberge du Coq Doré.
At some point, his dark brown eyes had transformed into a pale golden hue, adopting a vertical orientation.
He was a Psychiatrist, a Sequence 7 Psychiatrist of the Spectator pathway.
He had just employed Awe!
In ancient times, it was referred to as Dragon Might!
The brownish-green vines and branches surrounding Anthony Reid, manipulated by Susanna rather than the Tree of Shadow, cowered and retreated from him.
Observing Charlotte's descent into madness and confusion, rendering her unable to evade Lumian's attacks, Susanna, who desperately absorbed vitality, narrowed her eyes and cursed, unable to conceal her deep-seated hatred.
"You shall all perish. Today, you shall all meet your demise!"
Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! On the Tree of Shadow, new tree trunks distinct from the main body shot forth like javelins, aimed at impaling Lumian in the midst of the wilderness.
Apart from utilizing the abilities of the Fallen Tree Spirit, Susanna

Mattise had not yet regained sufficient strength to affect targets dozens or even nearly a hundred meters away.
Lumian had foreseen this. With a roll, he positioned himself within the area where Charlotte aimlessly fled.
Thud! Thud! Thud! The tree trunk javelins impaled the ground nearby, pounding the wilderness like hammers.
Lumian rose to his feet, engulfed in crimson flames. He extended his arms slightly and let out a boisterous laugh.
"Bring it on, kill me!"
If Susanna were to blanket the area with relentless assaults once again, he could still find a way to evade them. However, Charlotte, lost in her state of confusion, would undoubtedly meet her demise!
As he bellowed, half-illusory crimson Fire Ravens materialized behind Lumian. They circled and traced multiple trajectories, fixating their sights on Charlotte Calvino.
The branches and vines on the ground surged wildly, swiftly ensnaring Charlotte, shielding her from harm.
A series of thunderous sounds resounded as the crimson Fire Ravens descended upon Charlotte, shattering tree branches and igniting vines, systematically stripping away layer after layer of the Actor's outer shell.
Bang!
Franca, who had closed the distance, stepped in and extended her right hand, firmly squeezing the trigger.
An iron-black bullet flew from the classic brass revolver and struck Charlotte's head with precision, piercing through the gap created by the Fire Ravens.
The enchanting, pure, and delicate visage instantly shattered, with red and white fluids splattering forth from her eyes, nose, and mouth.
With only its severed head remaining, the lifeless body stumbled a few steps in confusion before finally collapsing to the ground.
"Go to hell!" Susanna roared.
With that cry, brown branches, green vines, thick limbs, and pale-colored blossoms surged forth in a multitude of forms, converging upon Lumian, Franca, and Anthony.
Despite the nightmarish scene unfolding before them, Lumian sensed no immediate peril.
Until Susanna Mattise regained a certain level of strength, an attack that consumed a significant amount of spirituality posed no true threat.
Lumian charged forward once more, carrying the crimson flames that devoured his flesh, venturing deeper into the primordial forest-like setting.

Vines ignited, flowers turned to ash, branches charred, yet none impeded the enemy's advance toward the Tree of Shadow.
Suddenly, the objects recoiled, drawing the suspended human captives back into the embrace of the Tree of Shadow.
Susanna had thought it through. There was no need to squander energy merely to vent her rage. It was wiser to await the approach of the three prey, luring them into the range where desire could take hold, before employing her most formidable abilities to deal with them.
She could not accept her current weakness. That was one of the reasons why she refrained from invoking the incantation to seek assistance initially.
Before dragging the offering into the Tree of Shadow, the Son of God dared not reveal Himself in Trier. In the future, Susanna possessed a measure of confidence and needed to push the offering to a certain extent, securing the protection of the ritual. Only then could she utilize her fusion with the Tree of Shadow to confront the Son of God.
The Son of God was astonishingly deranged. He would never restrain the corruption He might inflict upon His subordinates.
As for Lady Moon, she had merely pledged to intercept potential saboteurs temporarily. Susanna dared not permit devotees of other deities to enter the Tree of Shadow.
Thud, thud, thud. Lumian raced through the abruptly vacated wilderness and dilapidated streets, sprinting toward the brownish-green tree. Franca and Anthony each selected their respective angles of attack and followed suit from different directions.
The fortunate vendors, pedestrians, and tenants who had yet to be ensnared by the branches and vines seized the opportunity to flee the wilderness, making their way towards the outskirts.

Chapter 260: Cracking

It didn't take long for Lumian, Franca, and Anthony to approach the Tree of Shadow, stepping within the effective range of Susanna's powers.

One of them had run out of Mysticism Smelling Salts and was consumed by crimson flames. His skin grew numb, but his flesh still burned with pain. Another moved gracefully, constantly shifting positions. Every now and then, she would inhale the scent of the metal canister in her hand and let out a sneeze. The third employed the Psychiatrist's Placate ability to pacify his emotions and desires.

In the ethereal crown of the tree, Susanna Mattise, positioned only four to five meters above the ground, grunted. Franca, dressed in a blouse and light-colored trousers, saw her reflection in Susanna's eyes.

Suddenly, intense fear gripped Franca.

Yet, this fear didn't arise from the outside world or grow abnormally intense. Rather, it originated from her understanding of the current situation and her desire to survive.

Susanna Mattise, fused with the peculiar tree, couldn't be treated as a mere Sequence 5. She ought to be regarded as a weakened Sequence 4, one lacking an incomplete Mythical Creature form!

Franca believed that Susanna Mattise would swiftly dispatch her, Lumian, and the information broker.

Before saving anyone, she had to save herself!

Franca halted, her yearning for life impossible to suppress.

She struggled, torn between the urge to flee and the nagging feeling that she shouldn't abandon her teammates.

Susanna Mattise's emerald eyes shifted toward Anthony Reid.

The information broker, his emotions and desires now stabilized, shuddered suddenly, an all-too-familiar fear surging from the depths of his heart.

A Spectator afflicted by severe mental deficiencies is all too easy to deal with... Anthony Reid fully comprehended his predicament, yet he lacked the power to resist.

A helpless sigh escaped his lips. When his Placate failed, he trembled and retreated to a corner, succumbing to overwhelming fear.

Swiftly, Susanna Mattise incapacitated Lumian's two companions, leaving them unable to offer aid for the moment.

Then, she directed her gaze at Lumian, who stood less than ten meters away from the Tree of Shadow.

As an evil spirit, Susanna possessed boundless extremism and

persistence. She still sought to capture this sacrifice.
Despite the ritual causing a great uproar, prompting numerous saints and even angels to rush and intervene, making its success unlikely, the Tree of Shadow could not be destroyed. It wouldn't even suffer significant harm. Unless the Eternal Blazing Sun or the God of Steam and Machinery were willing to bury the millions of people residing in Trier and expose even graver underlying problems underground, there would always be another opportunity, even if the present one failed.
As long as Lumian remained within her grasp, the sacrificial offering that perfectly sealed an angel, it wouldn't take long for Susanna to attempt the ritual once more!
Hence, the malevolent spirit, Susanna Mattise, desired to capture Lumian alive.
In an instant, Lumian's pace slowed, his mind consumed by the same thoughts.
I mustn't die. I mustn't die. If I perish, Aurore will have no hope of revival...
I must survive and uncover the truth behind the Cordu disaster. I must understand why Aurore believes in Inevitability...
These people have no connection to me. *What does it matter if they die?* Don't countless lives perish every day in this world? *Can I even prevent that?*
"..."
Lumian's pace grew sluggish, his expression contorting in agony.
The fiery crimson flames that engulfed him continued to burn, inflicting pain while also sharpening his senses.
But the more aware he became, the stronger his desire to survive.
This time, Susanna's influence over his desires had not faltered.
The Fallen Tree Spirit summoned an array of vines, branches, and tree trunks from the Tree of Shadow, ensnaring Lumian within a small circular perimeter of less than ten meters. The once open space transformed into a dense, ancient forest teeming with vegetation.
Damp, pale-hued flowers sprouted from the roots, vines, and branches, releasing odorless anesthetic gases that threatened to lull the surroundings into a deep slumber.
In that moment, Lumian's yearning for life aligned with his other thoughts.
To escape this dire predicament and survive, he had to press forward and defeat Susanna Mattise!
Lumian surged forward once more, gathering semi-illusory crimson flames behind him, spiraling them toward Susanna Mattise, who hovered merely four meters above the ground.

He didn't expect this assault to harm the Fallen Tree Spirit. After all, Susanna Mattise had merged with the Tree of Shadow, granting her formidable defenses and vitality. Moreover, she wasn't a mindless foe who couldn't dodge attacks or employ superpowers to safeguard herself.

Lumian's objective was to momentarily disrupt Susanna Mattise's focus and impede her from inciting another desire immediately.

This time, the crimson Fire Ravens managed to breach the ethereal barrier. They passed through the weakened defenses and hurtled toward Susanna Mattise.

Layers of brownish-green vines and branches encased Susanna Mattise, enveloping her in a wooden sphere, her pair of green eyes the only feature visible.

Amidst the rumbling, the plant-like encasement exploded, replaced swiftly by fresh growth.

Meanwhile, less than ten meters slipped away in the blink of an eye for Lumian.

Vast amounts of slumberous gas corroded his body, but they were swiftly consumed and evaporated by the searing crimson flames. The charred scent of his flesh neutralized the remaining fumes, leaving only a small portion to infiltrate Lumian's nostrils.

His thoughts slowed, his head spun, yet his movements remained unaffected for the time being.

Harnessing his momentum, Lumian alternated between his left and right feet, launching a forceful kick against the brownish-green trunk. He propelled himself forward by a couple of meters before leaping high into the air, his gaze fixed upon Susanna Mattise.

Behind him, a colossal fireball gradually took shape. His eyes reflected the wooden sphere and Susanna Mattise's emerald-green gaze.

It seemed as though he intended to hurtle himself at the treetop, obliterating the encasing of plants with the mighty fireball.

This particular stance bore an evident element of showmanship. Lumian's desire to perform had been subtly provoked by Susanna Mattise, even if his ceaseless pain could only be slightly suppressed.

Susanna Mattise grinned, allowing sharp brownish-green tree trunks to emerge from the surface of the encasement like a porcupine baring its spikes, ready to impale any unsuspecting prey.

Once Lumian sustained grave injuries, the vines and branches forming the sphere would unfurl, taking complete control of their captive.

As the massive fireball solidified, Lumian began his descent.
Yet, instead of lunging at Susanna Mattise, he regarded her with an air of superiority, eye to eye.
Still, he refrained from attacking. He continued his descent. Susanna Mattise wore a puzzled expression, perplexed by his failure to walk into her trap.
Only when Lumian touched down below the treetop did he make his next move.
The massive, incomplete fireball detonated, propelling him toward the trunk of the Tree of Shadow like a cannonball.
In his left hand, he wielded Fallen Mercury, now adorned with cracks.
Right from the start, Lumian hadn't set his sights on Susanna Mattise, who possessed freedom of movement and the advantages of being a Sequence 5. It would be highly risky, with little chance of success and much danger involved.
His sole objective was to strike the Tree of Shadow with Fallen Mercury, a single strike!
Without the enhancement of Termiboros, Fallen Mercury alone wouldn't be enough to alter the fate of the brownish-green tree. However, Lumian was confident that Susanna Mattise had fused to some extent with the Tree of Shadow. As the name "Fallen Tree Spirit" implied, a tree was necessary to embody a tree spirit.
This understanding derived not only from Lumian's observations but also from Franca's speculations and Susanna Mattise's own admissions and actions.
In essence, when Fallen Mercury pierced the Tree of Shadow, there was a strong possibility that it would alter the fate of Susanna Mattise, who had merged with it, rather than the fate of the Tree of Shadow itself!
Lumian's actions were intended to deceive Susanna Mattise into overconfidence, ensuring she wouldn't impede his approach to the Tree of Shadow or hinder him from gathering a fireball for propulsion.
And Susanna Mattise's manipulation of his desire to perform only fueled Lumian's confidence further.
Though acting was a waste of time and could potentially lead to missed opportunities, it also served as a cover for one's true intentions!
With a loud crash, Lumian and Fallen Mercury collided with the brownish-green trunk. Ribs cracked, wrist snapped, his entire body battered by the explosion and impact. But he managed to drive the pewter-black dirk through the outer bark and into the second layer.

As expected, Lumian didn't "see" the torrent of historical scenes. Instead, he sensed the illusionary river, shimmering with a mercury hue, that belonged to Susanna Mattise.

In the next instant, his desire was manipulated once again, and a barrage of javelins rained down from the ethereal tree crown.

Releasing his hold on the pewter-black dirk, Lumian entrusted the rest to Fallen Mercury.

He plummeted to the ground, using the pain to reclaim consciousness. With a swift roll, he evaded the tree javelins that impaled the earth.

When Susanna Mattise realized Lumian's true intent, she felt vexed, angry, and somewhat fearful.

The previous use of the pewter-black dirk had left a deep impression on her.

However, she wasn't overly concerned for her safety. With her connection to the Tree of Shadow, it would be arduous for her to be slain, even if she encountered a saint. Her worry lay in the possibility of severe injury, which would thwart her chance of capturing her prey once more.

At that moment, Fallen Mercury shattered into pewter-black fragments, silently descending to the ground.

Long worn and weakened, it could no longer endure.

However, its destruction also brought an end to the fate exchange, which should have taken several minutes to complete. It didn't stir any fate within Susanna Mattise. It merely bestowed upon her the fate stored within the blade.

Normally, this would be impossible as Fallen Mercury had to adhere to corresponding rules. But now, shattered and fragmented, it couldn't care less.

Susanna Mattise froze, purple flames erupting from her body.

Fallen Mercury had bestowed upon her the fate of the Tree of Shadow's root being consumed by an unseen underground fire. As a tree trunk akin to the Tree of Shadow, she couldn't escape this fate!

In a mere second, the purple flames vanished, leaving Susanna Mattise reduced to ashes, her eyes filled with disbelief and astonishment.

A tree trunk erupted in flames, cracking and collapsing.

Chapter 261: Escape

The branches and vines pursuing Lumian swiftly withdrew, as if responding to an unseen command. A javelin-like tree trunk crashed down, causing the rest to vanish into thin air.

Gasping for breath, Lumian cast his gaze upward as he sprinted onward.

At that moment, his eyes fell upon the incinerated form of Susanna Mattise, consumed by the vegetative sphere that had enveloped her. Not far off, he witnessed an unfamiliar tree trunk snap and succumb to fiery destruction.

She's dead! Relief flooded Lumian's being. She's dead! The burden of his struggle lifted, and he crumpled to the ground, no longer able to hold on.

The crimson flames that had enveloped him abruptly extinguished, unveiling his charred and disfigured body.

With great effort, Lumian struggled to prop himself up, his back pressed against the vine- and branch-adorned wall of the Auberge du Coq Doré. He resembled a forsaken vagabond, abandoned by the world, a hint of derision in his voice as he observed the Tree of Shadow sinking deeper and deeper into the earth.

Moreover, he witnessed the vines and branches retracting into the main trunk, the once-suspended individuals released from their tethers and descending to the ground from varying heights.

Among the initial group of victims, whose essence had been drained, three to four individuals remained suspended nearly three meters above the ground. Already weakened, most of their remaining vitality escaped as they suffered the harsh impact, causing them to lose consciousness on the spot. Perhaps there was still hope for their salvation, or perhaps they were beyond rescue.

The hundreds who had been suspended but had not yet lost a significant portion of their essence sustained various injuries from the fall. Though their lives were not immediately endangered, they hurriedly rose to their feet, driven to escape to the fringes of the wilderness.

Gabriel's complexion turned pale, bruises marring his hands and feet. Rather than fleeing, his initial instinct led him to stoop and collect the scattered Lightseeker script from the ground. The eloping couple, entwined together in their suspension, exchanged curses for being a hindrance, but they supported one another as they limped forward, their legs injured from the fall. They joined the fleeing throng, vanishing into the distance. Pavard Neeson, the proprietor of the clandestine underground bar, suffered relatively minor injuries. Grasping the freshly drawn draft, he raced ahead...

Charred and weary, Lumian settled on the street, leaning against the Auberge du Coq Doré, situated perilously close to the Tree of Shadow. Tilting his head back against the wall, he wore a faint smile while observing the energetic exodus of peddlers, passersby, and inhabitants of modest abodes as they fled towards the outskirts of the wilderness.

...

Within the confines of the Tree of Shadow, Lady Moon beheld a tumultuous clash unfolding, with numerous angels and saints joining the fray. Her faction faced mounting pressure due to reinforcements from the two Churches and Bureau 8. An overwhelming sense of retreat washed over her.

Should this continue, the two Churches might resort to drastic measures, beseeching divine intervention! Lady Moon swiftly resolved.

Deprived of several abilities and ensnared by various Prohibitions, she pressed against the bulge in her abdomen and parted her lips.

An ear-piercing Shriek erupted within this alternate realm, causing the nearly two-meter-tall Tree of Shadow before her to undergo an instantaneous metamorphosis.

Upon the branches and mist-shrouded bark, which depicted scenes from the past, figures born from diverse desires, now lifeless, sprang back to existence, save for Emperor Roselle.

Many were demigods, emerging from their respective "histories" with vacant, icy expressions and an aura of chilling darkness.

Resurrection!

Empowered by the Divine Fetus nestled within her womb and the unique essence of the Tree of Shadow, Lady Moon temporarily revived the accumulated desires from over a millennium in their original corporeal forms.

Though the revival would be short-lived, and the resurrected beings notably weaker than before, the sudden influx of demigods into the battle within mere seconds could profoundly impact the unfolding chaos.

It was precisely due to the timely aid of the Divine Fetus that Lady Moon dared to linger behind, partaking in this tumultuous clash. Without it, having only agreed to provide cover and hindrance to those from the Bliss Society, she would have already sought refuge elsewhere.

In eerie silence, the resurrected phantoms disintegrated beneath the scorching sunlight. Lady Moon seized the opportune moment to summon Paramita, which had not yet fallen into complete disarray, merging with it and vanishing from sight.

...

On Avenue du Marché, inside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the parliament member's office.
Imre, the mixed-blood individual, refrained from immediately questioning Jenna, an assassin. Instead, he directed two agents from Bureau 7 to tend to Jenna's wound, staunching the profuse bleeding and applying bandages. He conveyed the impression that allowing the culprit to succumb to her injuries would hinder their ability to gather crucial clues. Valentine, Antoine, and the other agents observed and interrogated the remaining participants of the banquet, including Cassandra and Rhône, who belonged to Greg Artois's team.
Rumble!
Once again, the ground beneath their feet trembled. Those near the windows caught glimpses of Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches, intermittently flickering with light. Approaching them were clergymen garbed in white robes embellished with golden threads, wielding various contraptions.
This development disrupted the interrogation of Imre, Valentine, and the others. After a while, Angoulême de François strode into the banquet hall, clad in a coat adorned with golden buttons, accompanied by a grayish-white humanoid mechanical creation. Several additional team members and a contingent of police officers followed suit.
Upon hearing Imre's report, Angoulême cast a glance at Jenna and instructed Travis Everett, "Bring all the attendees of the banquet to headquarters for separate interrogations.
"Leave the assassin here. We shall handle her questioning. Hmm... also keep the members of Monsieur Member of Parliament's team. There are matters we must clarify."
Everett raised no objections. The organization's constables escorted the anxious onlookers away from the khaki-colored building housing the member of parliament's office.
As the hall emptied, Angoulême turned to the two Bureau 7 agents standing beside Jenna and instructed them, "Escort the assassin to the lounge. We must ensure she does not overhear our conversation and withhold any truths."
With Jenna escorted to the lounge facing the back alley, Angoulême approached Cassandra, Rhône, and the others, speaking in a deep voice, "Hi there, there is information we must acquire."
A faint smile adorned his face.
"Indeed, Monsieur Member of Parliament has met his demise. According to the law, his position is immediately vacated.
"In other words, you are no longer part of Monsieur Member of

Parliament's team. The immunity you once enjoyed is no more.
"So, before we engage in our discussion, let us proceed with some notarizations."
Upon hearing Angoulême's words, Cassandra and the others' expressions underwent a marked change.
Meanwhile, in the lounge, Jenna, who had calmed herself after assassinating Hugues Artois, heard a tumultuous commotion emanating from the hall.
One of the armed agents from Bureau 7, tasked with keeping watch, hastened to the door to investigate.
Seizing the opportunity, Jenna's heart skipped a beat as a plan materialized in her mind.
Her countenance transformed, and she gazed past her remaining guard with a mix of surprise and fear.
Though extensively trained, the agent possessed an understanding beyond that of ordinary individuals. Today, an abnormal occurrence had unfolded on Rue Anarchie, culminating in the assassination of Monsieur Member of Parliament. Reports indicated a battle involving supernatural forces transpiring within the hall. It was only natural for him to worry about potential repercussions reaching the lounge and an unseen threat lurking behind him.
Subconsciously, he entertained the notion of turning around, but halfway through the motion, caution compelled him to remain vigilant.
Yet, this proved to be the only opening Jenna needed.
Already restrained by handcuffs, she balled her fists and struck the agent's shoulder and neck with force, sending him sprawling to the ground. His revolver slipped from his grasp.
Before the agent near the door could react, Jenna positioned her hands on the windowsill, propelling herself upward. She crashed through the glass and descended into the back alley with the grace of a feather.
Suppressing the pain from her gunshot wound, she sought refuge in the shadows of a nearby corner and swiftly departed the khaki-colored building.
...
Lady Moon weaved through different directions, employing various abilities until she finally emerged from Paramita.
At that moment, she found herself in Quartier Éraste, northwest of Trier. Before her stood a magnificent building adorned with golden steeples.
Lady Moon cautiously surveyed her surroundings and discreetly let out a sigh of relief.

Had the Tree of Shadow's deeper intrusion into the Fourth Epoch's Trier served the Great Mother's interests, she wouldn't have joined the Bliss Society's mission. She had no desire to reveal herself. It was well-known that those who controlled desires often fell prey to their own desires. The chances of failure were not insignificant.
Without delay, Lady Moon slipped into the beige building from its side entrance.
A few hundred meters away, a golden retriever sat silently beside a woman dressed in green.
They observed Lady Moon's every move and the grand structure with its numerous steeples, their expressions solemn.
It was the Sacred Heart Cloister of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.
...
In the wilderness where Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and the buildings on Rue des Blouses Blanches crumbled, Lumian witnessed the Tree of Shadow on the brink of sinking into the ground. He couldn't help but taunt Termiboros.
"Well, I'm not that unlucky after all. I've actually succeeded."
Hardly had the words left his lips when Franca, who had regained her senses, rushed over and hissed, "Are you trying to play the role of a charred corpse?"
As she spoke, she retrieved the Healing Agent she had obtained from the Poison Spur Mob, intending to offer Lumian half a canister.
Lumian's injuries weren't as severe as they seemed. Fatal burns for most Low-Sequence Beyonders would require no more than a month or two for Pyromaniacs to recover from. As for fractures, explosions, and impacts, none of them could claim the life of a Hunter immediately. Enduring until tomorrow would naturally bring about recovery.
Considering the potential pursuit of official Beyonders after the wilderness completely vanished, Lumian didn't tempt fate and consumed half a vial.
Soon, he felt his body rapidly regenerating.
At this moment, the wilderness teetered on the edge of collapse. The streets had returned to their original positions, and many people had already rushed in.
Franca surveyed her surroundings and spoke swiftly, "Can you still move? We must leave this place swiftly."
"Alright." Lumian rose to his feet.
He took a couple of steps to the side, intending to retrieve the charred tree trunk that had been part of the Tree of Shadow before departing.
Just as Lumian grasped the trunk, something caught his

peripheral vision.
Within the depression left behind by the Tree of Shadow's submersion, a hazy and translucent creature darted past.
Lumian's pupils dilated, struggling to believe what he had witnessed. He yearned for a clearer view.
It was a diaphanous, indistinct figure resembling a lizard!
It bore an uncanny resemblance to the elf he had encountered in his dream!
It was the very creature that had emerged from Aurore's mouth!

Chapter 262: Review

Lumian had always held the belief that the lizard-like elf he saw was merely a figment of his dreaming mind. Symbols and metaphors held a deeper significance than the tangible reality.

Yet now, before his very eyes, the diaphanous and elusive lizard-like creature revealed itself in all its existence!

It was undeniably real!

Moreover, it had appeared in Paramita, emerging from the deep chasm left by the Tree of Shadow—a most peculiar event involving formidable powers!

Could it be that the lizard crawling out of Aurore's mouth was not a fabrication? *What did it symbolize, and what were its intentions?*

Lumian's brow furrowed as he contorted his expression, experiencing a mix of pain, shock, confusion, and withdrawal.

This agitation stirred something within Lumian, making him feel that he could regain some of his memories and determine their authenticity. Yet, this time, the scenes didn't flicker through his mind as they did during psychiatric treatments or after hearing Madame Pualis's words. The dream still lingered in his memory.

In that moment, Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

"Do you truly believe that I am responsible for all the anomalies and misfortunes surrounding you?

"Do you think you can escape Susanna Mattise, who is nearly a demigod with a backup plan, by relying solely on the efforts of the sealed me and a Sequence 7 Beyonder like yourself?

"Do you believe that Susanna Mattise's failure is solely due to her being an evil spirit, extremism, impatience, and lack of preparation before the ritual? Is there no other underlying reason?"

These words overlapped and resounded in Lumian's mind, allowing him to grasp their meaning within a short span of time.

Lumian was taken aback, feeling as if he had been plunged into an icy lake, experiencing the transition from early summer to winter.

He blurted out, "Then what is it?"

Termiboros remained silent, as if sensing and comprehending something.

In an instant, Lumian's joy surged. He felt the heavy burden on his shoulders dissipate significantly.

Does this mean that Aurore truly fell under the control of that peculiar lizard-like creature?

Was that why she remained oblivious to any abnormality when awake, seeking assistance from the outside world alongside me?

No, perhaps she sensed that something was amiss. The correct interpretation of the letter's order should be: "We are getting weirder. The people around us need help as soon as possible!"
Franca nudged Lumian.
"Why are you lost in thought? Hurry, let us leave this place swiftly. The official Beyonders and clergymen have arrived!"
Lumian shook off his daze and dashed with Franca to the far end of Rue Anarchie, his singed clothes clinging to his body, along with the tree trunk originating from the Tree of Shadow—not Susanna's later creation.
During this process, two revelations suddenly dawned upon him.
As an angel of Inevitability, Termiboros also displayed an astute understanding of various matters. It is inconceivable for Him to remain oblivious to Susanna Mattise's offering Him as a sacrifice to the Mother Tree of Desire with me as the primary vessel without unsealing the seal. He is no novice to the mystical world like me!
Therefore, He never anticipated the outcome of Susanna Mattise breaking the seal from the very beginning. He made those claims purely as a bluff, coercing me to seek His aid and agree to certain unequal terms, creating an opportunity for Him to truly escape.
What He didn't foresee was my choice to deceive Susanna Mattise, compelling Him to provide me assistance based on the information she provided. No, He must have considered this possibility, but he had nothing to lose by attempting it. What if I had not devised a swift solution at that critical moment?
Dammit, His intentions are far too sinister! I could have fallen victim to His deception with the slightest carelessness!
Likewise, Susanna Mattise is no paragon of honesty.
Since she sought guidance from the Mother Tree of Desire and acknowledged the possibility of an angel being sealed within me, why wouldn't she contemplate the potential transmission of power through the seal? Subsequently, she prayed for power capable of withstanding the influence of Termiboros's leaked power, or even surpassing it. I failed to perceive it then and came dangerously close to corruption despite being distant.
Had I not escaped the Tree of Shadow in the nick of time, I would have succumbed to corruption.
Why didn't Susanna Mattise seek assistance right from the start? Could it be that corruption poses a threat to her as well?
Indeed, despite unforeseen circumstances during the Cordu ritual, the padre, as the host of the sacrificial ceremony, was shielded by the power of Inevitability. He did not transform into a monstrous entity or merge into the three-headed giant like the others and successfully escaped... Susanna Mattise also planned on relying on

the protection of the ritual to resist corruption?
Hence, she bought time, awaiting the completion of the ritual's preparations!
She did not target and control me initially because she knew that pushing too hard would prompt Termiboros to intervene prematurely, introducing too many uncertainties.
Thus, she endeavored to create an illusion for me, fostering the belief that resistance and escape were within reach. Only when I broached the subject of the angel did she stall for time, stringing together a series of seemingly revealing words. She concealed her true trump card, biding her time for me to make the wrong choice with Termiboros's aid and fall into her prearranged trap.
Although she did not anticipate the attack from the Montsouris ghost, had it not been for an external intervention exploiting the crack created by the ghost, I would have remained trapped within the Tree of Shadow's depths. Moreover, she was on the verge of officially activating the ritual and gaining protection.
Dammit! Beautiful Actors truly possess the knack for deceiving others!
As Lumian and Franca sprinted ahead, their surroundings suddenly transformed into a surreal spectacle. Vibrant layers of colors intertwined with indescribable, fantastical creatures.
His head spun, and his vision became hazy.
When his sight cleared, Rue Anarchie was nowhere in sight, and the vibrant palette had vanished.
Instead, he found himself standing on a verdant hillside, facing Madam Magician, adorned in an orange dress.
She's here too... Lumian glanced around but couldn't spot Franca.
As if sensing his unspoken question, Madam Magician smiled and spoke, "The Two of Cups departed with her Major Arcana card to attend to some matters."
"The Two of Cups?" Lumian was perplexed.
"That's Franca. She is one of us. Her code name is Two of Cups, just as you are the Seven of Wands," Madam Magician casually explained. "You have officially joined our ranks. Speak to the Two of Cups later and have her introduce our organization. I won't say much."
Not only is Franca a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but she is also part of the secret organization utilizing tarot card codenames? Lumian felt a mix of surprise and elation.
This meant that he and Franca were true comrades.
Madam Magician scrutinized Lumian's charred countenance and fragmented attire. From somewhere, she produced a simple brown suit tailored for a man and tossed it to him.

"Change into this later. While it's not particularly scandalous for Trieriens to roam the streets nude, one mustn't entirely succumb to the surroundings. You must maintain your true self. Only then can you resist the potion's corruption and minimize the risk of losing control."

Lumian caught the clothes, and Madam Magician pondered for a moment before speaking, "Tell me in detail what has transpired recently. Although I knew you would encounter followers of the evil gods and become entangled with them, I did not anticipate you getting embroiled in such weighty matters directly."

Lumian recounted the events, starting from his arrival in Trier to his use of the Summoning Dance to lure Susanna Mattise. He focused on the sacrificial ritual, Termiboros's involvement, and the enigmatic lizard-like creature.

As Madam Magician listened, her expression grew solemn. Once Lumian finished speaking, she nodded slightly and said, "This is highly abnormal. Both Termiboros and that elf are far from ordinary."

She gazed at Lumian, speaking in a direct manner, "It wasn't Termiboros who aided you in enhancing Fallen Mercury's abilities within the Tree of Shadow and allowed the Montsouris ghost to arrive early."

"Not Him?" Lumian had speculated the issues that Madam Magician might uncover, but he never expected her to address this matter so clearly.

If not Termiboros, then who else could it be?

Moreover, the subsequent changes only occurred after the compromise of the Inevitable angel.

"I don't have the answers either." Madam Magician shook her head slowly. "What I can affirm is that the seal of that great existence wouldn't allow Termiboros to unleash such power. If that were possible, He would have long manipulated you to assist Him in breaking the seal."

Observing Lumian's perplexed expression, Madam Magician continued, "All Termiboros can do is influence your judgment and choices. After all, He is sealed within you, and your fates are intertwined to a certain extent.

"To put it simply, concerning Charlie's situation, Termiboros couldn't expedite Susanna Mattise's recovery. He couldn't dictate when or how she planned to find Charlie. He could merely utilize this situation to instill in you the intention of employing the Luck Transference Spell to alter Charlie's fate and augment the corresponding likelihood.

"From this standpoint, do you believe He possesses the capability to

enhance Fallen Mercury's abilities and allow the timely arrival of the Montsouris ghost?
"However, it is plausible for Him to aid you in shouldering the burden of the past scenes within the Tree of Shadow.
"Hence, I have consistently advised you to seek my counsel beforehand on critical and perilous matters rather than making decisions on your own."
Lumian's heart surged like a tumultuous ocean.
He recollected the incident where Rentas took Charlie underground and realized that Madam Magician's words held truth.
Charlie's gruesome plight and destiny stemmed from two factors. Firstly, the threat posed by the Bliss Society through Rentas, and secondly, Lumian's own choice at the crossroads of fate. Thus, once Rentas was slain by their hands, Charlie's fortune merely improved marginally. Only when Lumian made the correct decision did everything revert to normalcy. There were no indications of Termiboros's influence.
If He could sway Charlie's path in the same manner He manipulated the Montsouris ghost, Lumian would have fallen victim long ago.
Moreover, why would Susanna Mattise entertain the idea of capturing me alive, knowing that I can receive indirect assistance from an angel after she departed from the Tree of Shadow and was in a weakened state, despite being aware of Termiboros's limited influences?
Unless Susanna Mattise, who possesses a trace of godhood due to the Tree of Shadow, had already deduced that Termiboros was impotent in exerting influence and remained tightly sealed following the internal conflict within the Tree of Shadow. There must be another origin to this quandary! And that origin did not depart alongside her! Dammit! I had presumed that even if my judgment faltered or the fate exchange prolonged, Termiboros would never allow Susanna Mattise to capture me alive, as it would render Him a sacrificial pawn. Little did I know, He lacked the capability entirely... Lumian postulated, obtaining a more rational explanation for the recent turn of events.
"What exactly happened?" he inquired, a tinge of anguish and anger coloring his tone.
Madam Magician pondered for a few seconds before responding, "Taking into account those misfortunes, I suspect that Termiboros has allies in the outside world. In other words, there may be a Beyonder lurking around you who possesses the ability to influence fate. He secretly accomplished tasks in accordance with the ideas transmitted by Termiboros, but he did so with subtlety to

avoid exposure."
A word suddenly flashed across Lumian's mind: Sufferer!
In his dream, after entering the underground altar with Ryan's team, they had become tainted by the aura of a Sufferer!
As for the owl and the other "him" within the Warlock's tomb, prior to their unveiling, they always gave him the impression that they were the root of the problem and the mastermind behind it all.
Could these be symbolic as well?

Chapter 263: Choice

Lumian had always believed that his dream self represented his darker side, a twisted persona born from the corruption of Inevitability.

But now, it seemed there was more to it.

There was no problem with his understanding of his own essence, but was he, along with the owl hidden in the Warlock's tomb, also serving as a symbol?

A representation of the puppet master behind the scenes, the true orchestrator of the lizard-like creature and the grand ritual in Cordu?

And now, he was lurking in the shadows, attempting to collaborate with Termiboros in order to break free from the seal.

However, Termiboros's attitude towards the lizard-like creature seemed to suggest otherwise...

Lumian fell silent for a few seconds before sharing his speculations in detail with Madam Magician.

The Magician listened attentively, pondering for a moment before speaking.

"I initially believed that by undergoing progressive psychiatric treatment and recalling forgotten events one by one, the truth of Cordu Village would become clear to you. It wouldn't be any different from what I already know."

"But hearing what you've just said, I suspect that some of the symbols and metaphors in your dreams hold deeper, hidden secrets."

"But regardless, those symbols and metaphors are projections from my actual experiences. It's impossible that I still can't decipher them after regaining my memories, right?" Lumian objected.

Madam Magician smiled and replied, "That might not be the case."

Seeing Lumian's confusion, she explained simply, "On the one hand, you may not have directly experienced those events, but your spirit and subconscious sensed danger and abnormalities, projecting them into your dreams with symbolic elements.

"On the other hand, Termiboros is sealed within you. Your fate is intertwined with His. Your subconscious might have detected something unusual through this connection."

Lumian grasped Madam Magician's meaning to some extent and pondered for a moment.

"After completing the full psychiatric treatment, can Madam Susie directly awaken my subconscious and inquire about the meaning of the different symbols?"

"It's extremely risky. When the time comes, we'll have to rely on

the joint opinion of the two Psychiatrists to decide if it's worth attempting," Madam Magician replied thoughtfully. "But that's a long way off. Before then, I can assist you in finding Beyonders skilled in decrypting symbolism to see if we can accurately interpret it without relying solely on your subconscious. Would you like that?"

"Alright," Lumian agreed eagerly.

Then, he asked with concern, "What about the potential Termiboros ally lurking nearby? Are we not going to do anything about them?"

Madam Magician remained calm as she answered, "Now that we have sensed this possibility, I don't think they will risk staying close to you. Of course, I will continue to keep watch."

She then inquired, "Do you plan to continue the mission assigned to you by the Aurora Order? Many people probably witnessed you charging toward the Tree of Shadow. This will raise Gardner Martin's suspicions.

"If you don't want to take the risk, inform Mr. K about it. He will likely be delighted that you've slain a Fallen Tree Spirit and thwarted the Bliss Society's plan. He can assign you a new mission.

"If you wish to proceed, I can arrange for someone to blur the memories of those who saw you. In any case, it's normal for your exact appearance and physical characteristics not to be clearly discerned in that environment."

Without hesitation, Lumian declared, "I wish to proceed."

Gardner Martin, a Sequence 6 or Sequence 5 of the Hunter pathway, commanded a formidable group of Hunters. If Lumian continued to interact with him and joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order, there was a high chance of acquiring the potion formulas and main ingredients after Pyromaniac.

Through these experiences, Lumian had gained a profound understanding of the disparities between Sequences, the terror of powerful individuals, and his own limitations. He felt an urgent need to enhance his strength. It was a sharp contrast to his initial nonchalance upon arriving in Trier, where he sought hope amidst confusion.

Only by becoming strong enough could he withstand misfortune and unveil the truth behind the catastrophe in the perilous world of mysticism. Only then could he discern whether various propositions using Resurrection as bait concealed sinister intentions!

Madam Magician nodded slightly, granting Lumian's request.

Prompted by their previous conversation, Lumian inquired with curiosity, "Has the Tree of Shadow been dealt with?"

"How could that be?" Madam Magician scoffed. "Even if both Churches requested divine intervention, the Tree of Shadow would remain unresolved. Heh heh, it's not impossible, but the price is exorbitant, deterring anyone from paying it."
"What sort of price?" Lumian pressed further.
As if taking a leisurely stroll, Madam Magician moved two steps to the side of the hill.
"After being nourished and exerting influence for over a thousand years, the Tree of Shadow has become one with Trier. It's akin to its shadow, its dark aspect. Unless we obliterate the entire city and exterminate every inhabitant, not even a true deity could fully eradicate it.
"Of course, we could relocate Trier elsewhere and resettle its entire population. Then, after five to six years, when the Tree of Shadow has weakened due to the loss of nourishment, we could uproot it. However, by doing so, the other perils lurking beneath Trier would become uncontrollable."
There are other dangers? Lumian furrowed his brow.
Isn't the underground of Trier too daunting?
Perplexed, he asked, "Why wasn't the Tree of Shadow destroyed when it was first planted?"
Madam Magician chuckled.
"Well, wasn't it due to the urgency of constructing the city and countering certain underground threats? They failed to notice someone secretly planting the Tree of Shadow."
She didn't divulge details about the dangers, implying that Lumian didn't need to know them at present.
Lumian keenly sensed this and sealed his lips.
Madam Magician looked at him and let out a self-deprecating laugh.
"Are you unhappy that I sent you directly to Trier and involved you in a series of perilous affairs without providing corresponding assistance?"
"No," Lumian replied, puzzled by Madam Magician's question.
From his perspective, accepting missions, completing tasks, and reaping rewards seemed fair enough. And throughout this process, Madam Magician would offer guidance through letters.
Apart from the past few years of adoption, Lumian had long grown accustomed to not relying entirely on others and making full use of the various resources at his disposal to achieve his goals.
Madam Magician chuckled.
"Didn't you see the Major Arcana card summoned by the Two of Cups? It happened because she was coincidentally in Trier. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been so effortless and effective."

She paused for a moment before continuing, "If I were to treat you as an extension of my eyes and hands, a loyal subordinate devoid of your own will, I could allow you to recite my name and provide ample assistance to ensure your safety most of the time. However, you chose the Hunter pathway. It's a path that demands combat and a strong sense of self.

"A flower nurtured in a greenhouse cannot become a qualified Hunter. It's immensely challenging for a Hunter, who always fights within their comfort zones with a patron, to attain godhood and become a saint. In due time, they will have to invest more time and pay a higher price to compensate for their present deficiencies.

"What kind of person do you aspire to be?"

Lumian fell silent for a moment before responding, "I want to be the one who makes those scoundrels tremble."

His answer was unequivocal.

Madam Magician nodded in satisfaction.

"Of course, that doesn't mean I won't care about you. I will still reply to your letters, provide my opinions, and even extend assistance upon request. However, I don't want you to feel perpetually shielded."

Lumian nodded, signifying his understanding.

He recalled Susanna Mattise's swift recitation of certain words to seek high-level assistance. Combining that with the keywords mentioned by Madam Magician, he spoke thoughtfully,

"Can reciting the honorific name of a specific entity draw their attention and receive corresponding aid through prayer?"

"Yes," The Magician nodded subtly. "However, it requires the sufficient goodwill of the other party. Once you reach a certain stage, I will also disclose my name to you. Yes, you are aware of Mr. Fool's honorific name, but without a ritual, simply reciting it will be difficult to elicit an effective response. It may even have adverse consequences. This is because Mr. Fool is contending with an ancient deity. The outcome will determine the fate of us all and whether this world can survive the apocalypse."

Mr. Fool? The abbreviation for that mighty existence is The Fool? Truly befitting of a secret organization that employs tarot cards as their codenames... When Lumian heard of The Fool, he instinctively connected it to the tarot cards he encountered daily, rather than associating it with the honorific name. It seemed more like a description.

Madam Magician changed the subject and glanced at the tree trunk in Lumian's hand.

"This is a valuable item. Attacks without godhood cannot harm it,

and upon striking a target, it may trigger a particular desire.
"If you acquire Beyonder characteristics that align with it, you can find a way to employ a saint-level Artisan to combine them, turning it into a mystical item.
"You shouldn't carry it with you at all times, though. Otherwise, your desires will gradually spiral out of control. It poses great danger for Beyonders who consume potions."
Just as she finished speaking, Madam Magician turned her head slightly, as if listening to something. Then, she addressed Lumian, "That will be all for today."
In the blink of an eye, Lumian's vision filled with a blend of vibrant colors and ethereal, indescribable creatures.
In the next moment, Rue Anarchie appeared before him, riddled with cracks.
Madam Magician had vanished,
leaving Lumian bewildered as he hastily donned the clothes and pants he held in his hands.
His attention was then drawn to Franca, standing not far away.
Simultaneously, the two of them exchanged smiles.
Before they could convey their shared sense of being part of the same secret organization, Jenna emerged from the alley shadows, dressed in a grayish-blue gown.
Lumian and Franca instinctively went on guard.
Jenna winced, gripping her wounded ribs, yet expressed joy, "Dammit! You guys are alright!"
She appears genuine... Franca mumbled and approached her, concern etched on her face. "What happened to you? Why are you injured?"
Jenna cast nervous glances around and lowered her voice.
"I assassinated Hugues Artois and ended up getting shot."
"Dammit! You succeeded? And you managed to escape?" Franca exclaimed, taken aback.
Even she didn't believe she could pull off such a feat.
What was this called? This was the embodiment of a true assassin!
Lumian noticed a few passersby on Rue Anarchie, so he interrupted Jenna.
"We can discuss it once we reach Auberge du Coq Doré. I'll extract the bullet and treat your wounds."
"I still have half a vial of Healing Agent," Franca chimed in happily.
She supported Jenna and, following the shadows along the roadside, they made their way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.
As they neared their destination, they encountered Anthony Reid, the information broker.
Lumian chuckled derisively.

"I thought you'd have escaped."
"I still have some unfinished business in the market district," Anthony Reid replied vaguely.
The four of them took a few more steps and laid their eyes upon the beige five-story building.
Auberge du Coq Doré leaned a little more than before. Cracks marred its walls, intertwined with withering vines and branches.
As the remaining tenants had yet to return, it exuded an indescribable dilapidation and silence.
...
It had been some time since the catastrophe.
Amidst the crowd, a young man dressed plainly disembarked from the steam locomotive, carrying an old suitcase. He left the platform behind and strolled all the way to Rue Anarchie.
There, he laid eyes upon the beige five-story building, its surface adorned with streaks of vibrant red paint.
"Auberge du Coq Doré," he murmured, reciting the name of the establishment. He reached into his pocket, feeling the banknotes and coins, realizing it was likely within his means.
To his surprise, Auberge du Coq Doré was much cleaner than he had envisioned. While certain areas were plastered with outdated newspapers and cheap pink paper, there were no signs of the ubiquitous bedbugs, repugnant phlegm, or various types of rubbish.
After renting Room 302 for 15 verl d'or, the young man climbed the stairs with his suitcase, feeling content.
It's even more affordable than I thought. A clean motel like this costs only 15 verl d'or per month...
Once he had stowed away his suitcase in the cramped room, he decided to treat himself to a drink using the money he had saved.
In the Capital of Joy, one had to play the part!
He made his way to the underground bar, immediately engulfed by the lively clamor as he stepped inside.
A man in a shirt and bow tie, beer in hand, flailed his short arms, energetically expounding to the people around him. Others reveled, singing and dancing, refusing to be subdued.
At the bar counter, a few patrons sat with an intriguing contraption.
Curiosity piqued, the young man approached, examining the rubber hose and glass canister of the device. He asked with fascination, "What is this?"
A handsome customer with blond hair streaked with black turned his body and responded with a bright smile,
"It's called the Idiot Instrument that tests an individual's

intelligence. Or you could say that it measures a person's foolishness."
(End of Volume Two—Lightseeker)